

INFERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

Do you have a favourite army? The reason I ask is because of some strange questions I was asked at the recent British Games Day, Games Workshop's annual festival of all things Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. Every year, we spend a totally insane day in a packed convention centre in Birmingham, demonstrating everything to do with the awesome GW hobby to something like 8,000 rabid fans! As you can imagine, the Black Library had its part to play in the proceedings. We were showing off a whole raft of new and upcoming releases, including several keenly awaited novel titles, the new GW calendar and of course the latest issue of *Inferno!* It was gratifying to meet in person so many Black Library fans, who greatly enjoy reading about the Warhammer worlds as well as playing games in them.

But there were several customers who really confused us. Here was a typical question: 'This new *Inferno!* – has it got any stories about Wood Elves in it, because I play Wood Elves?' When, sadly, we had to tell him that although there was a tremendous selection of all-action stories from both the Warhammer and 40K worlds in this issue, as well as some

dynamite comic art and a sensational illustrated feature from Mordheim courtesy of our own Ralph Horsley, there weren't any stories about Wood Elves. 'Oh, well in that case I'll not bother,' our friend sighed, and shuffled away, leaving us scratching our heads in confusion.

That sort of question turned up half a dozen times during the course of the day, so it's perhaps not a big deal. But it set me thinking. Ultimately, should we in the Black Library be ensuring that each Warhammer and 40K troop type is covered in a story, feature or comic strip in every issue? Is it really true that Warhammer fans don't want to read a kick-ass action story unless it features the troops they collect? To us that almost goes against what the Black Library is here for.

Our mission is to bring brand new tales that add yet more rich detail to the already intricate Warhammer worlds. On occasions, we have related the stories of familiar heroes and villains, but much of the time we bring you new characters, brand new heroes whose adventures will be new to you (although, as may soon be happening, some of these characters may yet end up in the games themselves!). The dark and gothic worlds of

Warhammer are vast places, with huge areas that have never been explored, and one of our most important missions seems to us to be to go in there and report back.

But I'd be keen to know what you, our loyal *Inferno!* reader, thinks about this approach. Should we limit ourselves to covering familiar heroes and villains who you already know and love from the various Warhammer rule-books? Or do you also want to read about new characters like Gaunt's Ghosts, Gilead, Ragnar and more? Drop us a line and let us know what you think.

In the meantime, we're really sorry, you six unknown Games Day punters, but this issue has no stories featuring Wood Elves or Halflings, Mordian Iron Guard or Chaos Dwarfs. It does, however, have a truly bumper selection of epic sagas from the far corners of the Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 worlds – including the return of Dan Abnett's Iron Snakes Space Marines and Necromundan bounty hunter Nathan Creed – which we sincerely hope you will enjoy.

Marc Gascoigne
Editor

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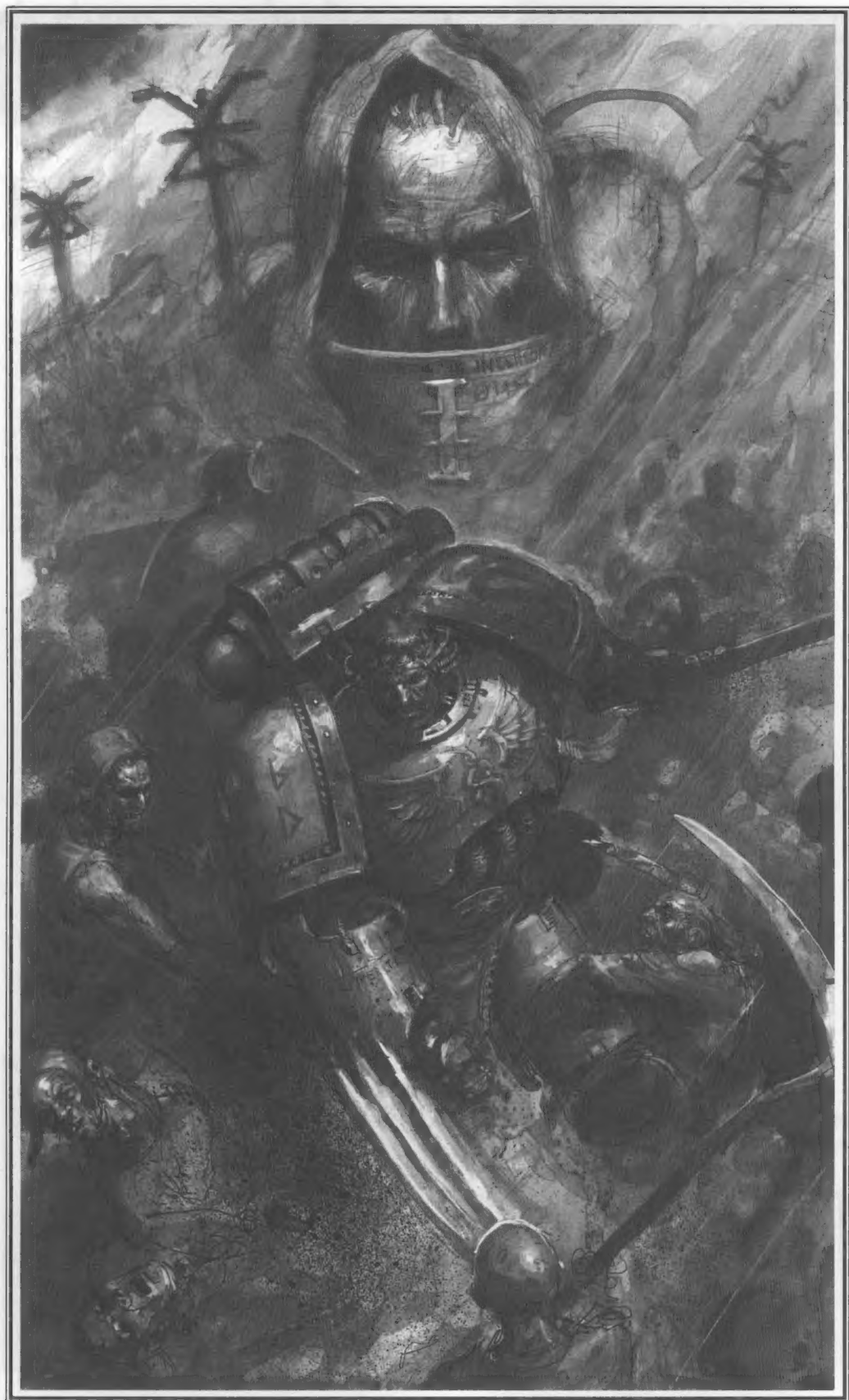
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FOR AS FAR as any of them could see, the place looked like a vast open wound. The soil of Ceres was rich in iron ore, which gave it a deep, red cast. The climate circulated particles of the ore into the atmosphere, so that when it rained, it rained crimson liquid.

It was raining now. It had been for weeks. Drizzle, bright as oxygenated blood, streamed down from low, dark clouds, turning the russet soil into soft, scarlet, wet folds that looked like raw flesh.

Through the wounded land, the Rhino crawled, heavy tracks slipping and thrashing in the red mire. Its grey, white and red livery was washed a watery pink from the rain, and the chapter banners hanging from the rear frame were as dark as soaked bandages.

Ahead, lay Hekat. And death as bright and bloody as the rain.



DETACHMENTS OF Space Marines from the noble Iron Snakes Chapter, beloved of the Emperor himself, had arrived on Ceres two weeks before to prosecute the sudden uprising of a Chaos cult. Ceres was an agricultural world with a sparse population that accreted around small farm townships, each one separated from its neighbour by thousands of square kilometres of arable land. The uprising had engulfed Nybana, the main township and landing field, a dejected place of shanty habs, grain hoppers, threshing mills and freight yards. That had been the Chapter's first port of call. Eight full squads of towering armoured forms had disembarked from their drop ships at dawn and scoured the

township, incinerating the cultists without question or quarter. The fighting had been intense but brief, lasting only until noon. Armed with autoguns, crop-scythes and fanatical zeal, the cultists were ruthless and formidable, but no match for the bolt guns and superhuman power of the infamous Space Marines. By noon, the Iron Snakes' banner and the Imperial eagle had been fluttering over the main Guildhall of Nybana.

Captain Phobor, the venerable and much-decorated commander of the Iron Snake mission, along with his squad officers, had then met with Inquisitor Mabuse, who had spent some months on Ceres uncovering the cult before alerting the Imperium.

In the atrium of the Guildhall, the phalanx of giant warriors stood in a semi-circle around the robed, white-haired inquisitor in dutiful silence as he appraised them of the situation. Mabuse began by praising their work in liberating Nybana. From outside came the thump of bolters as the Space Marine squads finished their cleansing. The bodies of the fallen cultists, some six hundred or more, had been stacked in an outlying granary and torched with flamers. The pungent scents of burning filled the air, despite the heavy rain.

'They call themselves the Children of Khorne,' Mabuse had said, his lofty voice faltering just slightly as he was forced to pronounce the dark name. 'We can presume the pun is lost on them. My investigation has shown that the taint was brought in from off world. Nybana is the main lift-port, and a large proportion of the population here are indigent freight handlers and cargo-men from a dozen other planets. Some vermin coven, practising the foul ways secretly in their midst, carried the poison here and set it loose into the population.'

RED RAIN

BY DAN ABNETT

'Is it restricted to the main habitation?' Phobor asked, his voice metallic and expressionless as it filtered through his helmet speakers.

'No, captain, I don't believe it is.' Mabuse got to his feet and wandered over to an ornate side table.

Stood to the left of Phobor, Sergeant Priad of Damocles Squad watched the inquisitor with curious eyes. He had served with the Iron Snakes for six years, and for the last two had commanded that decorated detail. He had seen things of such horror and such wonder in that time that no amount of training in the Chapter Hall of Karybdis could have fully prepared him. But he had never seen an Imperial inquisitor close up before. He knew that no two were alike, and he knew that all were feared, perhaps as feared as the Space Marines themselves. Inquisitors were singular beings, braving both the physical dangers of the galaxy and the mental torments of limitless evil as they struggled and probed to uncover the taints of the Great Foulness.

This Mabuse was a tall, lean man in his forties with a shock of white hair and a face angled and sculptural, as if the pale skin clung tightly to his skull. His robes were black and edged with golden braid, and his right hand, now Priad saw it, was a mechanical prosthetic of intricate golden callipers and gears.

Mabuse lifted an object from the table in his artificial hand. It was a figurine, about thirty centimetres high, woven from straw.

'A corn-doll,' Mabuse told them, holding it up for them to see. 'A votive object, common on so many rustic and agricultural worlds. Here on Ceres, they weave them at harvest time, one to represent each of the outlying harvest towns, and they are displayed here in the main Guildhall during the Time of Celebration.'

He lifted another from the table. There was something hideous and twisted about this one, even though it was only a doll woven from straw.

'I found this... and six more like it. Khorne-dolls, if you will. I see the pun is lost on you Marines too. Whatever. Each one has been made according to the practises of various harvest townships, but the designs have been perverted to make them symbols of the cult.'

Mabuse let the thing drop back onto the table top as if he had no wish to touch it any longer, even with a hand made of metal.

'And from that, we may infer that at least six of the outlying townships have been polluted by the cult. Though the main uprising here in Nybana has been quashed, it is vital that these outlying offshoots also be checked and, if necessary, burned and cleansed.'

'You can identify the relevant townships from the dolls?' Phobor then asked.

'Yes,' Mabuse said, as if such an arcane act of divination was child's play. 'You must send squads out at once, captain. Send them out to purge these places. Until that is done, Ceres must be considered uncleansed.'

There were eighteen farmships on Ceres outside Nybana. Mabuse and his aides had identified six positively from the loathsome dolls, but he insisted that all should be checked in turn. Phobor kept two squads with him to hold Nybana firm, and sent out the other six to all compass points to undertake the purge.

Damocles squad had been sent northwest. Four townships lay in that direction: Nyru, Yyria, Flax and Hekat. Of these, only the most distant – Hekat – had been positively marked by a doll.

It took Priad and his squad a full day's hard drive across the rainswept land to reach Nyru, and a further day to confirm it was free of taint. Another day's trek brought them to Yyria, which also proved to be clean, though the fear and resentment of the townsfolk kept them suspicious and prolonged the search.

Another day and a half's drive through fallow uplands followed, and now the wet season greeted them with low storms, squalls of bloody vapour and hard, red rain. They approached Flax on the seventh day after leaving Nybana. By then, reports had drifted in from the other roving squads. Pliades Squad had found cultists in the township of Broom, far to the south, and had been engaged in a running street battle for a day and a night. Manes Squad had uncovered another nest of evil in a township called Sephoni, and had been forced to put it to the torch. No other squad had reported finding a trace of the darkness.

Damocles reached Flax farmship.

Flax was dead. A week dead, Priad estimated. Damocles squad moved out from their Rhino transport and fanned through

the blood-wet streets, finding nothing but burnt-out habitat sheds, ransacked grain hoppers and rusting harvesters. Brother Calignes finally found the townsfolk. They had been harvested. Four hundred men, women and children, butchered with corn-scythes, their bodies and body parts piled in a corn silo to rot. The place was crawling with crop weevils.

Priad voxed the news to Phobor at Nybana. Inquisitor Mabuse himself came on the line and questioned Priad closely. Was it a cult centre that had chosen suicide? Was there any sign of true corruption? Had the place been sacrificed by cultists from another farmship, Hekat perhaps?

Mabuse relayed simple instructions as to what to look for. Priad listened carefully, and then dispatched his men to search. An hour later, he climbed into the back of the Rhino, removed his helmet, and spoke to Mabuse on the vox-link again. Outside, the bloody rain drizzled.

'Lord, I think it is the work of outsiders. There is no trace of a shrine or a cult fastness in Flax. The only signs we can find are the blasphemous sigils daubed in blood on the sides of the granary where they piled the bodies. My men have found tracks trampled in the cornfields around the township. I thought at first it might be the signs of the murderers' escape, but the tracks wind and overlap. From the top of the granary barns, you can see they make a pattern. The trampled lines are quite deliberate. They form a vast, unholy symbol in the corn, hundreds of paces across. Inquisitor, I pray I never have to look upon such a sign of the Dark Powers again.'

'You have done well, brother-sergeant. From your reports, I am sure that Flax was a sacrifice. A force of cultists, large enough to overwhelm four hundred humans and slaughter them, is loose in your region. They made a statement out of Flax, a declaration. You must hunt them down. From the evidence as it presents to us, I'd hazard Hekat was the most likely place to start.'



DAMOCLES MADE ready to move on to Hekat, two days away. Priad had Brother Pindor take a flamer from the Rhino and torch the cornfields, obliterating the crop-mark. They also burned the dead, and made blessings over the vast pyre, consecrating the innocent and the fallen in the name of the Emperor.

Now, Hekat farmship lay before them, and the Rhino puffed and wheezed its way up the muddy trackway towards the cluster of barns, crop-silos, habitats and mills.

Brother Scyllon drove the armoured transport. In the rocking, bucking rear section, the men of Damocles Squad began a final weapons check and murmured private prayers of salvation and forbearance to themselves.

Priad sat in the chain-seat near the rear hatch, adjusting the fit of the hefty lightning claw around his right hand. The claw was the symbol of leadership for Damocles Squad. Sergeant Raphon, hallowed be his memory and his rest, had worn it before Priad, and had bequeathed it to the young Snake on Rosetta where he fell.

Before Raphon, it had decorated the fist of Pheus, heroic in battle. Before Pheus, it had honoured the might of Berrios, mighty Ithikan. Before that, great Sartes had made it wet with ork blood. Before that, Dysse had carved his way to the sleep of champions with its electric majesty, ripping his way through the cruel hordes of the pirate Eldar scum.

And before that, a line of heroes whose every name and every deed Priad knew, and who were with him every time he donned the claw. Right back to Damocles himself, great Damocles, greatest of the great, generations before, who had first raised the claw and given his name to the fighting team.

Priad flexed the long, segmented fingers of the metal glove, and watched as blue sparks hissed from digit to digit. The claw weighed close to seventy kilos and was three times the size of a human hand. But even without the strength-enhancing mechanics of his Imperator armour, Priad would have not been tested by the weight. He was of the Adeptes Astartes. He was a post-human titan, gene-forged to serve the Emperor of Terra from birth to death. Stripped of his armour, he was still a force of destruction, many times a man. Armoured, his face

hidden behind the expressionless visor of the Marine helm, his limbs encased in electric-motivated ceramite plates, his senses magnified a thousand fold, he was a god-killer.

Let the Foulness spew up its dark deities! He would face them and slay them!

Priad looked down into the open palm of the gleaming claw. He saw the nicks and dents of war that it wore as badges of valour. He knew them all. This deep scratch earned by Raphon in close combat with a daemon-thing on Brontax. This jagged scar made by Pheus when he killed a Chaos dreadnought. The missing digit tip Dyse had left impaled in the chest of the warlord Grondal when he had torn out that fiend's heart.

Then he saw something else, looking back at him from the mirror surface of the steel glove. A face: pale, dark-haired, dark eyed, resolute. Himself.

For a scant moment it looked far too mortal and vulnerable. Priad took up his helmet and locked it into place. What he saw now, through the lenses of his battlevisor, reflected back up from the polished claw, was a great deal more reassuring. A Space Marine.

'Ten minutes from the township,' Scyllon called over the trooper to trooper headset.

Priad acknowledged and looked around at his men. One by one, he took in their power.

Kules, shortest of them all at just over two metres, thickly set like a barrel, his long black hair braided up against his scalp as he put on his helmet.

Illyus, his handsome face scarred and sutured around his artificial eye, loading his bolt clips.

Xander, the youngest and tallest, his eyes golden and faraway.

Pindor, with his deep-set eyes and hawk-look, resetting his armour links.

Natus, easing the pistons of his robotic left arm and sliding his bolt gun into its thigh pouch.

Andromak, smiling as ever, adjusting the weight of the massive plasma gun on his back-harness.

Calignes, sharp-faced, black-eyed, roguish, cleaning the spine plugs in his neck before setting his helmet in place.

Memnes, the apothecary, preserver of life, minister of death, grey-bearded and solemn as he checked the contents of his narthecium before snapping it shut.

Scyllon, at the helm, stripped to the waist so as to manhandle the controls better, his taut, muscled torso blistered with plug-ducts and link implants.

Damocles Squad, Priad thought. Praise be. God-killers, world-smiters, Space Marines, as great and as doughty as any band of Iron Snakes to use that name.

Priad looked over at old Memnes. The grey-beard took the sign and raised his voice, beginning the Litany of Approaching War, which the other men joined. Memnes took them through the Call of Ithaka and the Loyalty Oath of Karibdys, and each man answered the returns without hesitation.

All of those who had not yet donned their helmets now did so. Kules took the helm of the Rhino as Xander and Pindor helped Scyllon to armour himself. Each lock and twist of the armour seals was praised and blessed.

Captain Phobor had conducted the Rite of the Giving of Water, the old Iron Snake custom, at Nybana when the force had first arrived, but now Memnes solemnly carried out the Rite of Sharing, as was appropriate before a battle. The tubular copper tube containing precious water from the endless seas of their homeworld Ithaka was passed around, and each man anointed his winged snake chest-symbol with a drop or two as Memnes intoned the old words.

Brother Andromak took out the Iron Snake standard – the snake crest, double-looped – and fixed it to his shoulders. Brother Apothecary Memnes anointed it with water too. The water was clear, like liquid glass. How unlike the blood that rains on us here, Priad thought.

The Rhino churned into the open main square of Hekat and Kules slewed it to a halt.

The place looked deserted.

Priad popped the rear hatch, and Damocles Squad fanned out in formation, weapons armed and raised, hunting for movements.

Nothing.

So very ominously like blood, the rain washed down over them all.



THE FAN OF Iron Snakes spread down the main street of the farmship, scanning to all sides with their auspex units, weapons braced ready in armoured hands. Eight of them were on foot, with Priad at the head of the fan. Kules rolled the Rhino along after them, turbines idling, the main rig of floods and searchlights ignited to probe the storm-darkness of the place. Rain sleeted in dark stripes through the beams of hard light. Scyllon rode on top, in the open turret, his hands on the grips of the pintle-mounted storm-bolter.

There was no sound except the crunch of their footfalls, the low rumble of the transport and the beat of the rain.

Priad held up his left hand, showing three fingers, circled his hand and pointed.

Calignes, Xander and Pindor moved ahead on the left sweep, checking doorways and the dingy breezeways between buildings units.

Calignes signalled back 'clear' and the three Marines took up firing positions on the left side of the street.

Now Priad gestured again, his right hand this time, power-gloved. Another three fingers, these crackling electricity.

Andromak led Illyus and Natus down the right side. There was a longer wait, as Natus checked an open side barn that the farmers had used to store broken machinery and trash. He emerged and shook his head in a clear, over-emphatic gesture.

Andromak checked the main entrance of what appeared to be the main townhall. He turned back and made a gesture of clasping his hands together, that Priad knew meant 'locked' or 'chained'.

Priad strode across to Memnes, who was gazing around the dismal place speculatively. Priad's massive armoured feet splashed through puddles of gore-like rainwater that had accumulated in the gouged tracks of the muddy street. It was like being in an abattoir that hadn't been cleaned in decades.

'Like Flax, you think, brother apothecary?' Priad asked, his vox-burst punctuated at start and finish by a click of static.

Memnes shook his head. 'Something feels different, sergeant. Oh, we may find the townsfolk butchered in some corner, as Calignes did in Flax, but there is something else...'

Memnes snapped open the faceplate of his helmet and slid it up so that the red drizzle flecked his bare face. Had any other member of Damocles done such a thing without permission, Priad would have reprimanded him for presenting a target. But Memnes, old Memnes, had more experience than the others put together, and he could breathe in signs of danger. Sometimes, Priad knew well, it paid to let him scent the location.

'Fear, anticipation, anxiety... the air is heavy with it. There are living souls here, even though our auspexes don't show them.'

'Hiding?'

'I would think so...'

Priad wondered if he should open the Rhino's tannoy and hail the hidden people with a declaration of support and rescue. He decided against it. The quiet was unnerving but somehow he had no wish to break it.

Priad crossed to where Andromak and Natus stood by the doors of the townhall. Pausing only to allow the pair to raise their weapons ready, he smashed the doors in with one savage kick. A broken trailer chain dragged across the floor from the splintered doors. Someone had locked themselves in here.

The trio entered, guns chasing for targets. The room, a huge hall with wooden pillars, was dark, and the floor was scattered with debris. One massive skylight far above was shattered, and rain streamed in, flooding the floor. Natus tried the wall lever for the lights, but the power was out. They switched to nightvision and saw the place in a ghostly green phosphorescence.

'The floor is flooded. Rain,' Natus's voice cracked over the link.

'Not all of it,' answered Andromak. He had reached a far corner which was slick with red liquid though it was far away from the hole in the roof lights. 'That's rain. This is blood.'

He was right. It was impossible to tell where the rain ended and the blood began, but by any standards, there was a lot of blood. It splashed and smeared the walls, and there were smudges and occasional hand prints. But no sign of corpses.

Priad moved through to a council chamber behind the main hall. There was more blood here too, soaking the hessian rugs and the soft furnishings of the rows of seats. The far

end wall was covered in framed placards listing the names of the town's mayors and the annual harvest yields in proud gold leaf. The boards were peppered and riddled with small arms fire, punctured, holed and splintered. Priad realised there were thousands of spent shell cases littering the bloody floor.

'Quite a fight,' said Andromak beside him.

'What were they shooting at?' Natus asked, moving forwards past them. He pointed, and to their expert eyes it was clear that the gunfire damage made distinct arcs and sprays across the wall, as if sustained automatic fire had been trying to chase and catch targets moving with frightening speed.

Andromak kicked open a door to the left, off the council room, and found store closets and filthy cloakrooms. Blood covered the grimy blue tiles in here too, and the wooden latrine stalls had been shot apart by frenzied automatic fire.

Behind the council room, down a long, onyx tiled hallway, they found a chapel dedicated to the Emperor depicted as the provider of bounty and fruitful harvest. But the statue of the Emperor, holding a sword in one hand and a ploughshare in the other, had been decapitated, and the altar rails blasted into matchwood by more gunfire.

One of the loathsome daemon-form dolls, what Inquisitor Mabuse had called, as if it was some wry joke, a Khorne-doll, had been nailed to the statue's chest. Words composed of letters and symbols so foul they made Priad sick to see them had been daubed across the plinth.

Beside him, the sergeant heard Natus cough and gag in his helmet, choking on his rising gorge.

'Brother Natus?'

Natus, over the link, made a mewling noise. Even the strongest Space Marine could fall prey to the insidious horrors of Chaos, and this abomination had them all stunned and revolted. To desecrate the image of the Emperor with these marks...

Priad knew he needed Natus sharp. Despite the fear and horror that was in him too, he turned on his brother Snake sharply.

'Natus!'

Natus couldn't form a coherent word. Priad raised his left fist and smashed the back of his hand across Natus's armoured

face plate. The warrior reeled, his visor dented.

'Compose yourself, brother! This is precisely what the Darkness wants! This is why they performed this sacrilege! To unman the likes of you!'

'I-I'm sorry, brother sergeant,' said Natus, stunned back into rational thought.

Priad raised his bolter, swung around and blasted the deformed statue and the corn-doll into fragments with a burst of explosive rounds. The noise was deafening.

The vox-links exploded into urgent life.

'Weapons fire! We heard weapons fire!'

'Brother sergeant? Respond?'

'What's going on in there?'

'Stand easy,' Priad replied, exchanging the clip of his bolt gun deftly. 'Just a little cleaning up. No targets. But the enemy is here. Be vigilant.'



OUTSIDE, ACROSS the street, Xander heard his brother sergeant's words. With Calignes and Pindor, he held the positions on the left side of the thoroughfare.

A small white dot showed on his auspex suddenly, moving and jinking in a disordered pattern. Fifteen paces off, behind the row of agri-shops and smithies.

'Contact!' he reported.

Calignes and Pindor saw it too, and the trio swung around the address the buildings on the left side. Memnes crossed to them, readying his bolt gun. Kules moved the Rhino up a little, with Scyllon sweeping the storm-bolter.

Xander looked back at Memnes. 'Do we go in?'

'Brother sergeant?' Memnes queried.

'We're coming out,' Priad returned over the link. 'Move in.'

Xander and Memnes moved off the street down a littered breezeway, a side-alley that took them along behind the store barns and smithies into the back yards of shanty habitat terraces. Calignes and Pindor broke open the door of a tractor shed and advanced through the gloomy interior, passing farm vehicles under tarpaulin

wraps. Rusty chains dangled from the low beams of the roof. The pair made a parallel course to Xander and Memnes, marking the blue dots of the Space Marines on their auspex scanners. The white dot blinked ahead, between the two fronts.

Xander and Memnes pushed through a back gate made of warped pulpboard and slid along a crumbling brick wall, thick with black moss and lichens. They were in a narrow back ditch behind the habitats where they backed on to the farmshops and the tractor shed.

The light was bad now, the rain heavier. The swirling black clouds seemed to be right down low over their heads. Even with nightvision optics, visibility was poor.

'There,' said Memnes, his visor still raised, pointing ahead. 'It's in that outbuilding.'

The structure was a single story lean-to of corrugated iron. Xander and Memnes advanced and approached the entrance at the western end, furthest from the main street. Calignes signalled that he and Pindor were approaching the other end from the back of the tractor shed.

Xander tried the door, easing the handle down, testing for locks.

Something came out of the lean-to, taking the door off its frame and slamming it into Xander. The force was so great, the massive armoured warrior was thrown backwards and through the mouldering wall on the other side of the ditch. He took down a section of rotting bricks and ended up on his back in the yard of one of the terraced habitats.

Just behind him, Memnes braced and fired, raking a bright line of explosive bolts through the air that blew out the framework of the lean-to's left side. He tried to track the shape that had exploded out of the shed and floored Xander. It was all he could do to see it.

He glimpsed a quadruped, long and lean, twice the size of a man, it seemed. It was as blood-red as the rain. Memnes saw a suggestion of teeth, huge as scythe blades; of claws; of a whipping tail, as long and knobbed and gristly as a length of human spine.

All his shots missed, but they drove the thing back into the lean-to.

He charged after it. 'Calignes! For the love of Terra! It's coming your way!' he bellowed into his link.

At the far end of the shed, Calignes and Pindor braced, trained fire, but were still too slow. A red blur, something they couldn't even see but knew must be there, burst out of the shed and leapt up over their blasting guns.

Calignes felt a hard impact and spun away, winded and dazed, falling sideways and hard into a stack of tractor wheels. He heard Pindor exclaim over the vox. An utterance of surprise, roughly cut off.

Priad, Andromak and Natus, with Illyus close behind, came out of the rear of the tractor shop at a run. They found Calignes slumped against the rusting wheel hubs. Something had ripped through the front of his chest plating, making three jagged stripes in the ceramite. Blood leaked out of the torn armour.

There was no sign of Pindor except his fallen bolter.



THEY REGROUPED at the Rhino. Scyllon and Natus carried Calignes in and tended to his wounds. The rents were deep and refused to clot. Blood weeped out of him like rainwater. Xander was dazed but intact.

Priad tuned up the Rhino's main auspex and hunted for Pindor, chasing the telltale trace of his Imperator armour, the identifying signal. There was nothing. It was as if Brother Pindor had simply vanished.

Memnes could see how black Priad's mood was, and how spooked Damocles was as a whole. They were all used to the superiority of being Adeptes Astartes, and on the rare occasions they encountered something more formidable, it left them dazed. For himself, Memnes couldn't begin to account for the speed of the thing. It had moved so fast, so powerfully, he hadn't even seen it clearly.

'I must find him,' Priad told Memnes quietly. 'Alive or dead, I will find Pindor.'

Memnes nodded. He expected no less of his brave sergeant.

'I simply won't accept that he's just vanished.' Priad cast a dour look at the Rhino's auspex unit. 'You felt life here, and we haven't found that on our scopes either.'

'I felt something, brother sergeant. It may have been that thing.'

'You felt fear, old friend. That thing faced down four Iron Snakes and took one of them as a trophy. It was not afraid.'

'True. So we cannot trust the auspex.'

'No, indeed!' said Priad. 'Something's blocking it – something that's hiding Pindor, the locals... and that thing.'

'Except at close range. Xander drew us to it when he got a fix.'

Priad mused. 'Adamantium sometimes blocks auspex scans.'

'There's none of that here, I fancy. Nor do I know of any local substance that can kill Imperial scans. If the auspexes can't be trusted, it's because of... of witchery. The talents of the dark to lie and befuddle.'

'Aye, I thought as much. All our instruments are blind. You were the only one who even glimpsed it.'

'My visor was raised,' noted Memnes.

Priad opened his own visor and turned to the men. 'We hunt a great evil that is invisible to our instruments. Open your visors. Use your eyes well.'

It was... unheard of, but they all obeyed. They opened their helmets and made themselves vulnerable, so as to be less vulnerable.

'Search teams!' ordered Priad, his voice sounding strange and raw, unfiltered by the vox link. 'Section the town. And take it apart!'



THE EIGHT remaining active members of Damocles Squad searched Hekat, basement by basement, attic by attic, barn by barn, silo by silo. They worked in pairs. Calignes, whose wounds had at last been staunched by poly-skin sprays from Memnes's narthecium, stayed with the Rhino, watching the streets from the turret.

As he searched, partnered by Kules, Priad wondered if he should report in to Phobor and Mabuse at Nybana. He didn't know what he could tell them or what advice he

could hope they would offer. In the end, he settled for a simple text message, saying they had engaged the cult and were pursuing its destruction.

Several urgent responses came from Nybana, promising reinforcement. Some were from Mabuse, demanding to know the nature of the cult.

Away from the Rhino, Priad ignored the chime of the vox messages. He would do this his way. He would find Pindor and salvage the situation.

In the Rhino, Calignes heard the beep of the vox-caster, demanding response. It would involve a great deal of pain to climb down into the cabin, so he screened it out.

Like Brother Sergeant Priad, he was sure there was nothing the power of Damocles Squad couldn't overcome. Besides, by the time help came, it would be days too late.



ILLYUS AND SCYLLON found them in the basement crypts of the ecclesiarchy temple at the north end of the main street. Three hundred and fifty farmers and family members, cowering terrified behind locked and barricaded doors.

Why the auspexes hadn't found them, none of Damocles could say.

Under Memnes's supervision, the civilians were brought out and taken to shelter in the farmstead's mess hall, a long, low building full of trestle tables and crude metal chairs. Medical aid was provided by the apothecary, and Scyllon and Xander were set to guard them while Natus broke open the stores and made food for them on the mess hall's ranges.

Priad and Andromak questioned the farm leaders, three scared and emaciated men.

'We heard what happened at Flax, so we decided to hide. Some... thing came, killing dozens. That's when we hid in the crypt.'

'This thing... what is it?' asked Priad.

'For the love of the Emperor, my lord, we didn't even see it!'

'It came in! It slaughtered!'

Priad looked over at Andromak. 'So Hekat is to be made a sacrifice like Flax?'

'It seems so, brother-sergeant... and therefore the cultists are hiding out there in the corn fields.'

Priad got up and stalked the room. Something wasn't right. He could feel that as plainly as he was sure Memnes felt his 'scents'.

The doll back at Nybana clearly marked this place as a cult centre, or at least a place where cultists were active. Yet there was nothing here but a townsfolk driven underground by some beast, and an attempt made to bleed the populace for the worship of some otherness deity.

Which was it? A cult centre or an innocent place? It couldn't be both.

And if it was innocent, what of the doll at Nybana? What had been its purpose?

To... bring them here?

The leader of the farmers broke of his reverie. 'You will save us, won't you, brave Marine? For the love of the Emperor! Please!'

Priad nodded. He would. He swore it.



♦ ILLYUS AND KULES were searching the grain silos at the eastern edge of Hekat when the rains came down in a torrent. Flashfloods of grain and squirming weevils burst from the sodden hoppers and washed around their feet. Illyus kept wanting to close his visor to shut out the blood rain, but Priad's instructions had been clear. He moved forward into the pelt, his gun ready.

Illyus had lost an eye on Eidolon, and his bionic implant twitched and irked him. When he glimpsed the red shape flashing through the rain, he first thought it a ghost image, a phantasm conjured by his artificial organ.

Then he realised he could only see it through his real eye.

All that they had surmised was true. The thing that stalked Hekat was only visible to naked sight. Mechanics and bionics, auspexes and scanners were worthless.

Illyus began to fire – and to cry out.

Kules ploughed over to join him, his own gun blazing, in time to see the great bestial thing, with its whipping spinal chord tail flying out of the rain to take Illyus down.

Kules emptied his clip into the monster. It was busy killing Illyus and thus formed a stationary target for an instant. If it hadn't paused to rip Illyus asunder, it would have been moving too fast for Kules to see.

He blew it apart with a dozen placed shots. Tissue and bloody matter exploded into the downpour.

Kules's sense of triumph was short-lived. Illyus had been decapitated and eviscerated by the thing in the blink of an eye. The dead Iron Snake lay sprawled beneath the exploded carcass of the Chaos predator.

Kules opened his vox channel and reported in.

'We have slain the beast!' Priad exclaimed to the farmfolk around him.

'Damocles, with me! You people stay here until we return. Your nightmare is at an end.'

Damocles Squad formed up and left the mess hall.

None of them noticed the disquieted looks the farmers gave them.



KULES WATCHED OVER Illyus's body and waited for the others of Damocles to arrive. He tried to imagine what the thing's purpose had been. To kill and terrify the township, that was certain. But what else? Why had it been here? What had it been protecting?

Despite his orders, Kules crept forward and entered a silo to the left of the alley. What he saw shocked him to the very core.

In the open metal bin of the silo's base, an altar had been arranged. Candles fluttered and hideous patterns had been inscribed on the walls.

Pindor hung, upended, on a crucifix made of baler twine and wire. He had been tortured and abused, his armour stripped off. The Children of Khorne, twenty of them, resembling those Kules and his Iron Snake brethren had slaughtered in Nybana, stood around, performing a ceremony.

Pindor was clearly close to death.

One of the cultists turned and saw Kules. He cried out in alarm. In an instant, the twenty ritual heathens turned and pulled

out automatic weapons, blasting up at the silo's entrance aperture which framed the Iron Snake.

Kules slammed down his visor and waded into the chamber, percussive rounds pinging off his Emperor armour. He opened fire, swinging his bolt gun, exploding one cultist after another.

When he reached the crucifix, he used his blade to cut Pindor down and pulled his naked, limp form into his embrace.

'I'll get you out of here, brother,' Kules said.

It wasn't going to be that easy.



AS INQUISITOR MABUSE later concluded in his summation of the Ceres outbreak, the main cult centre was Hekat township, and not Nybana at all. When the main uprising in Nybana was overthrown, the cultists had left deliberate traces to draw the Iron Snakes to the remote harvest town, where they intended to perform a sacrifice.

The beast that Kules had killed... that had just been a diversion, a guardian force summoned forth with Chaos power to keep the Space Marines busy. Hekat and its people, all converted to the Khorne belief, wanted a Space Marine as a sacrifice. If they could ritually spill the blood of one of the Emperor's own, they could vouch a spell that would crack open the heavens and let loose an avatar of damned Khorne himself.



DAMOCLES WOULD willingly do everything in their power to stop that. As Priad led his detail through the streets to support Kules, they found themselves attacked from all sides by the farmers they had sworn to save. For the first time in his life, Brother Sergeant Priad realised he was going to have to break a sworn pledge.

The cultists, who but minutes before had seemed to be ailing farm workers eager for help, came at them from all sides. They were feral, insane.

'Kill them! Kill them all!' Priad told his men as they fought towards the silo.

Their armour and their bolters were a match for the superior numbers of the cultists, but barely.

Andromak lost a finger to an autoround.

Xander fell and was beaten half to death with ploughshares until Natus pulled him free.

Scyllon took a scythe blade in the arm and bled for weeks.

The rampaging cultists overwhelmed the Rhino in the main street. Calignes, weak from blood loss, had almost passed out. They set it ablaze and ripped him limb from limb.

Memnes fell, without a sound, a bullet through his exposed throat.

Priad reached the silo and slaughtered the cultists around them. He was as red with blood as with rain now. He reached Kules and helped him drag Pindor clear.

Then, with his power claw blazing, he set about finishing the grim business, revoking his pledge and killing the traitorous farmers rather than saving them.

At dawn the next morning, he was done.

Memnes, Calignes and Illyus were dead. So were four hundred and seventy cultists.



A VICTORY, OF sorts. It didn't feel that way to Priad. He ignored Inquisitor Mabuse's attentions as he led his battered squad into its departure shuttle.

'You have done a fine job, Priad. The Emperor will laud you.' Mabuse's voice was lofty as ever.

'I walked my men into a trap you should have seen, inquisitor,' Priad replied as the hatches closed. 'Next time Emperor willing, you will do better.'

The hatches slammed. Bearing their noble dead, Damocles left Ceres and returned to the void of space.

Below them, unceasingly the blood red rain fell. 

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THROUGHOUT THE OLD WORLD AS A GATHERING PLACE
FOR RACONTEURS AND THE TELLERS OF TALL TALES.

TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT

THEY COME TO THE TEN-TAILED CAT FOR MANY
REASONS. SOME TO BOAST OF THEIR EXPLOITS, SOME
TO AMUSE AND ENTERTAIN, OTHERS TO UNBURDEN
THEIR SOULS OR PASS ON DIRE WARNINGS...

The Scribe's Tale

...WHILE SOME
JUST COME TO
PICK A FIGHT!

WHAT'S
THIS PLACE COMING
TO? THIS IS A
WARRIOR'S TAVERN,
NOT A REFUGE FOR
DAMN INK
SCRIBBLERS...!

POETRY...! YOU HEAR
THAT, LADS? THEY'RE
LETTING *POETS* INTO THE
CAT NOW! NEXT IT'LL BE
WOOD ELVES AND
HALFLINGS!

I'M GLAD I
AMUSE YOU SO,
MY WARRIOR
FRIEND...

WHAT'S THIS?
MORE PRAYER-
MUMBLING OR
WIZARDRY?

NO, JUST
POETRY, AND I WRITE
IT ONLY FOR MY OWN
AMUSEMENT.

THIS TAVERN HAS A
REPUTATION FOR STORY-
TELLING, HAS IT NOT? VERY
WELL, I HAVE A TALE TO
TELL, AND WHEN I HAVE
FINISHED PERHAPS YOU WILL
NOT FIND POETS AND THEIR
WORK SO AMUSING
AFTER ALL.

GIOVANNI DANTELLI WAS A YOUNG POET OF SOME NOTE. IT WAS TO DANTELLI'S GREAT FORTUNE THAT HE HAD BEEN BORN IN *TILEA*, FOR WHERE ELSE BUT IN THAT MOST DECADENT OF LANDS WOULD HIS WORK HAVE EARNED HIM ANYTHING ELSE BUT A VISIT FROM THE WITCH-HUNTERS?

HIS WORK HAD A DARK UNSETTLING QUALITY TO IT. *'THE POETRY OF DAMNATION'* SOME CALLED IT, AN ATTEMPT TO DEFINE THE FACE OF THE HIDDEN DARK PLACES OF THE OLD WORLD.

DANTELLI HAD TRAVELLED WIDELY IN HIS YOUNG LIFE, SEEKING INSPIRATION AMONGST THE *TOMB-CITIES OF THE LAND OF THE DEAD*, THE *GHoul-HAUNTED PALACES OF MOUSILLON* AND THE *DARK FORESTS OF ILL-FAMED SYLVANIA*.

IT WAS IRONIC THEN THAT HE SHOULD FIND *THE ULTIMATE SOURCE OF HIS OWN DAMNATION* IN THE BACK STREETS OF HIS HOME CITY.

49999999

DANTELLI NEVER SPOKE OF WHAT HE SAW OR ENCOUNTERED THAT NIGHT, AND NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES HE RETURNED THERE, HE COULD FIND NEITHER BEGGAR NOR ALLEYWAY AGAIN.

IT DIDN'T MATTER. HE EMERGED FROM THE ALLEYWAY A CHANGED MAN, AND HAD ALREADY FOUND WHAT HE HAD BEEN SEEKING-

INSPIRATION FOR HIS NEWEST AND GREATEST WORK.

THE POET HID HIMSELF AWAY, WORKING ON HIS MASTERPIECE, AND CURIOSITY SOON GREW AMONGST THE CULTURAL ELITE OF THE CITY, SO MUCH SO THAT WHEN DANTELLI ANNOUNCED THE *FIRST PUBLIC READING* OF THE COMPLETED WORK, THEY FLOCKED TO ATTEND.

THE DOORS WERE SEALED, AS PER DANTELLI'S INSTRUCTIONS, AND THE READING BEGAN.

IF IT WAS A *TASTE OF THE EXOTIC AND MACABRE* THE AUDIENCE WERE SEEKING, THEY WERE NOT TO BE DISAPPOINTED.

FOR DANTELLI'S WORK WAS NO MERE WORK OF POETRY. IT WAS *AN INVOCATION* TO WHICHEVER ONE OF THE GODS OF CHAOS HAD REACHED OUT TO TOUCH THE MIND OF THE POET-

THOSE OUTSIDE SAID IT WAS ONLY MINUTES AFTER THE START OF THE EVENT BEFORE THE SCREAMING BEGAN.

IT WAS ONLY WHEN THE CITY GUARD BROKE
DOWN THE DOORS THAT THE FULL EXTENT OF
THE HORRORS AWAITING WITHIN WAS KNOWN.



SHALIA'S
MERCY! DRIVE
THEM BACK! DON'T
LET THEM ESCAPE
OUT INTO THE
STREETS!



TORCHES!
BRING TORCHES!
WE'LL BARRICADE
THEM IN AND BURN
THEM!

A RING OF PIKESMEN SURROUNDED THE BUILDING AS IT BURNED, ENSURING THAT NOTHING ESCAPED THE FLAMES.

NOTHING DID, AND SO ENDED THE *FIRST AND LAST* PUBLIC RECITAL OF GIOVANNI DANTELLI'S MASTERPIECE.



THEN WHAT HAPPENED TO DANTELLI? WHAT HAPPENED TO HIS AUDIENCE? DID THE DAEMON THINGS HE HAD CONJURED UP CONSUME THEM ALL?

SO IT WAS THOUGHT, FOR NOTHING *HUMAN* WAS FOUND IN THE RUINS AFTERWARDS...

OF COURSE, IF ANY OF THE GUARDSMEN FOUND IT STRANGE THAT MANY OF THE CHAOS THINGS THAT HAD ATTACKED THEM *WORE THE REMAINS OF FINERY SIMILAR TO THAT OF DANTELLI'S AUDIENCE*, THEN THEY WERE WISE TO KEEP SUCH OPINIONS TO THEMSELVES.

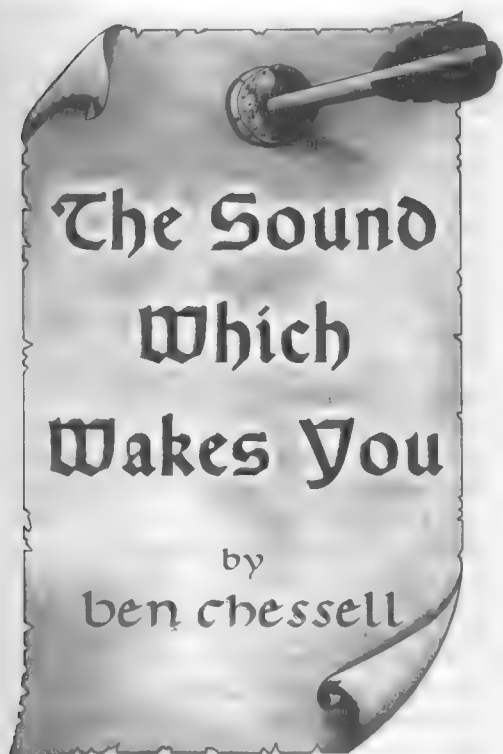
AS FOR THE POET HIMSELF, WHO CAN SAY...?



PERHAPS HE SUFFERED THE SAME FATE AS THE OTHERS, OR PERHAPS HIS *NEW PATRON* SPIRITED HIM AWAY, FOR TALENT SUCH AS GIOVANNI'S IS RARE INDEED, AND DESERVED TO FIND A WIDER AND MORE APPRECIATIVE AUDIENCE *ELSEWHERE IN THE MANY LANDS OF THE OLD WORLD*.

CIAO.

THE END



previous evening. Tomas prised open his eyes and, through the narrow slit which he managed in his visor of sleep, located his smock and boots.

Manoeuvring around his father, Tomas began slowly to dress. Neither acknowledged the other. Tomas pulled his smock over his head and squeezed into his boots while Pierro bent over the forge, puffing great blasts of air from his lungs with every swing of his hammer: a set of human bellows. Tomas's father worked hard and never left the smithy, unless it was to tend to the grove of ancient oaks which stood at the edge of the forest beyond the common pasture land.

It had been his father's responsibility, and so on down to the very roots of the family tree. One day, Tomas supposed, it would be his. Tomas left the smithy as soon as he was ready, as he did every morning.

In the doorway he met Marc, who was Pierro's apprentice and had held the post ever since Pietre. Tomas's elder brother had been the most promising young smith Montreuil had seen since the brighter days of Pierro's youth and the old regime. Marc was capable enough in his own steady way, and he and Tomas were friendly, accounting for the fact that Marc held the job which might have been thought most rightly to belong to Tomas. When his time had come, Tomas had refused to take up the position as his father's apprentice and it was only because of the prayers of his mother who had lost one son already, that Tomas was permitted to continue to live under Pierro's roof. Tomas brought in a little money to the family through different jobs for farmers in the district and Marc became the smith's apprentice. The two exchanged a polite greeting and Tomas plunged into the bright, grey world.



MANY IN THE forest edge village saw fit to comment about the estranged family, wondering whether it was Tomas who refused to meet his inherited responsibilities or Pierro who refused to fulfill his parental ones. Whatever the facts of the matter (and actually it was both), it was fortunate for Montreuil that young Marc,

YOU NEVER HEAR the sound which wakes you. It remains in the realm of sleep while you enter the world of wakefulness.

Tomas sat up like a bending board and willed his eyes to open. He slept on the smooth, black stones beside the forge; a good place to sleep, especially when the winter chills rolled down like waves from the Grey Mountains, leaving a coating of frosty brine come morning. One night a spark from the forge had spat out and ignited his bed of grass and bracken while he slept but, unlike his father, Tomas was not a heavy sleeper.

His father! Pierro was smith to the people who lived in the village of Montreuil, under the jagged shadow of the Grey Mountains, in the north of Bretonnia. Tomas came to the realisation, as he did every morning, that the sound which had woken him must have been that of his father's first hammer stroke for the day, which was closely followed, with mechanic inevitability, by the second.

Each blow of the hammer bid Tomas an ungente good morning, before departing the smithy to wake the creatures of the forest, and reminded him sternly of the amount of brandy he and Luc had consumed the

whose father had perished in the cells of the Marquis, could step in and fill the need.

These things wandered through Tomas's mind as he rounded the back of the smithy and stuffed his head and torso into the barrel of ice and water. Tomas practiced this routine every morning almost as though it might harden him as his father tempered a glowing blade. Tomas had need of the hardness of iron, if he was going to rid Montreuil of Gilbert: Gilbert de la Roserie, Marquis, holder of the King's commission – and tyrant.

Montreuil was a political enigma, a political embarrassment. Squeezed like a stone between the toes of a giant, the village lay in the foothills of the northern Grey Mountains. Further north even than the great spa city of Couronne, Montreuil had almost no value to the thriving rural heart of Bretonnia many days to the south.

The king, however, who wielded the complicated feudal system like a well-weighted blade, had found a use for Montreuil. He made a grant of land there to one of his lords whose outspoken militaristic opinions had become unfashionable in these times of détente. This commission, this putting out to pasture, had been bestowed on Gilbert Helene, who had become the Marquis Gilbert de la Roserie more than thirty years ago, after he had served the king faithfully, if a little bloodily, in the wars of their youth.

Most of the villagers guessed, quite rightly, that the King had entirely forgotten about the existence of Montreuil and the man who ruled there. Marquis Gilbert certainly behaved as if the village was his own private kingdom and the troop of border guards – a dozen aging career soldiers and petty officers – was his royal army.



THIS WAS THE sad situation that Tomas was determined to upset. Approaching his twentieth year, Tomas was brimming with the rebelliousness of youth and the sense of invincibility which comes with it. He dreamed constantly of calling the hundred or so villagers to arms and ousting the tyrant with his twenty men. There were practical problems of course. The soldiers, called 'sergeants' by the villagers because most of them had held at least that rank in the

national army before their ambition had got the better of them, were the only armed folk in the village. One of the Marquis's many laws prevented the villagers from owning anything more warlike than a bow for hunting and a knife for cutting meat.

What made this restriction all the more unbearable for Tomas was the fact that his own father forged the swords and spears with which Gilbert's men enforced his laws. Every helmet, every breastplate had begun life in the forge at the end of Tomas's house, beside which he slept each night and yet not one blade remained there.

This alone would have been enough to estrange father and son but the situation was aggravated for Tomas by the fact that his own father, Pierro, refused to talk about any aspect of his work with Tomas since Tomas had declined to become his apprentice. Pierro was a talented smith and on Gilbert's own hip hung a rapier, hilted in fine gold set with uncut topaz, made by Tomas's father. Besides which, the villagers of Montreuil were an infuriatingly peaceful people and took each new injustice as simply another trial to be borne in silence.

Lost in such thoughts, Tomas broke free of the woods and began the climb up the slope above the village. Sheep and goats picked among the scree for the meagre spring grasses, having only recently made the trek from their winter quarters themselves. Tomas headed toward the shepherd's hut, made from dark pine logs lashed with the innards of stock unfortunate enough to be chosen for the table. Tomas knew that, after last night's drinking episode, Luc would still be sleeping while his sheep strayed where they chose, unprotected from wolves, bears or rustlers.

The brandy had hit Luc a little harder than it had Tomas and besides, Luc loathed to leave his bed without the strongest provocation. He was just like any other villager, Tomas reflected as he chose a large stone with which to announce his arrival: happier sleeping, but waiting for the right signal to rouse him. Tomas heaved the stone overarm and watched with satisfaction as it bounced from the side of the hut with a loud thump. He sat on a rock to wait.

Luc stumbled out soon enough and, having realised how seriously he had overslept, looked about frantically for the source of the danger. Tomas sent another,

smaller rock sailing in a graceful arc toward the younger boy. It struck him on the hip and he spun to discover his laughing assailant. His relief was clear to see and it occurred to Tomas that Luc was more worried that he might have to confront one of the owners of the sheep, come to check the flock, than a wolf come to eat it.

Luc was a simple enough lad as far as Tomas was concerned though there was something about him the older boy could never quite grasp. The two breakfasted together among the stones and picked up their conversation of the previous evening. The plans they had made seemed less practical in the grey light of morning than they had by the lively dance of the fire the night before.

'Firelight makes all things seem possible, Tomas'.

'But did we not agree that all that is needed to begin this thing is for the right spark to be set to the tinder?'

'Tomas we did, but we had the confidence of the brandy then', Luc paused to consume a piece of bread, 'and besides we do not know how to set that fire, where to place the spark.'

'I hear you, I hear you', Tomas gestured, stabbing the air twice with his piece of bread, 'but what if I told you I had discovered where the spark should be set, what if I told you I will not wait any longer?'

'I would not believe you, and I would say you were still drunk.'

'But we do nothing! Even when my brother is killed my father does nothing. He accepts the blows of fate with the meekness of one of your sheep, in the jaws of a wolf.'

'Tomas, your brother killed a sergeant...'

'Who killed his lover...'

'Who poured wine over his head and threw him from the tavern...'

'This is senseless Luc, what matters is that nobody here does anything but work, eat and sleep. And I will be different.'

'Well that is what I want too Tomas, but...'

'Good, then bring your flint.'

'Now?'

Luc stopped chewing as the conversation which he had had many times with Tomas became something else altogether. 'Now.'

'But my sheep.'

'The sheep can see to themselves, we have a more important flock to tend.'

TOMAS LEADING, Luc following, the pair descended from the mountainside down the path to Montreuil. The view afforded by the summer pastures mapped out the tiny village, clustered around a green common from which a tree-lined avenue led to the manor. The large house, more in some ways a small castle, was surrounded by a thick hedge of briar and roses, thus 'The Roserie'. The hedge was more decorative than defensive, although it would take a determined attacker to hack through its thorns, and in spring, as it now was, it bore a crop of white and pink roses of notable beauty.

It was forbidden for any villager to pick a rose with which to adorn their own dwelling, or to make a cutting from the ancient tangle. Occasionally the Marquis would make a gift of a small bunch of the blooms to some young woman of the district he had chosen for his amusement, but otherwise he enjoyed his exclusive hold on beauty. It was towards this hedge, and the dwelling it concealed, that Tomas led an increasingly dubious Luc.

Although there would be no guard set at this time of day, Luc pulled Tomas up behind the last copse of trees before the rose hedge. Luc said nothing but looked hard at Tomas, perhaps willing him to reconsider, perhaps something else. Tomas returned the stare, expecting to find uncertainty, and saw instead a testing glance, questioning. Whatever the truth of it, Luc solemnly handed over his flint and tinder and climbed up into the oak to observe the crime.

'If you are not back in half an hour I will come looking.'

Tomas nodded, watched him climb in silence, and then turned toward his objective. A large brown arm descended from the tree and signalled to Tomas. Sufficiently comforted, Tomas sprang into a low run. There was a part of the hedge at the back corner of the manor which was particularly wild and Tomas headed for that now. It concealed the beginning of a tunnel which led through the vicious thicket and which was a dangerous children's challenge in Montreuil. Tomas had made the run many times as a youth, winning ale, sweets or merely admiration. The punishment if caught depended on which of the sergeants found you, and how drunk they were on that particular day. Having never been caught, Tomas had become something of a village

champion at the game and in his later years had taken to making the trip around the hedge for his own sake, seeking no accolades. Today those journeys of childish rebellion seemed like the memories of another boy.

He found the entrance to the tunnel with little difficulty though it had been some years since he had last been here. Indeed the architecture of the place had changed as does the shape of any childhood haunt when revisited. The dimensions shift, not just because the viewer is taller, but also because of the years spent away from the place. Certain things were more important to Tomas now than when last he had navigated the spine-wrought passageway and these things changed the very shape of the tunnel through the hedge.

He crawled in and lay still. The sounds of the manor drifted across the lawns which lay in between. Marquis Gilbert would still be asleep, but the maids and gardeners were at work. The sergeants slept in a long, low barracks on the other side of the house and Tomas wasn't sure how many of them would be awake. A few maintained notions of martial excellence and drilled constantly with his father's swords on the well-cut lawns which ringed the manor like a bright, green moat. Tomas listened hard for the sound of metal on metal, one the smith's son knew very well, but heard nothing. He began his work.

The driest fuel in the hedge was high in the branches but the best place to set a fire is low to the ground so Tomas set himself the task of fetching some down.

Climbing up through the hedge was a process best undertaken slowly and carefully, and ensured a certain amount of scratching nonetheless. After four trips up and back and about a half an hour's work, Tomas had a pile of kindling which reached his waist, topped by an old bird's nest.

At this point he paused and sat, sucking his arm where a thorn like a doornail had dug deep. With his other hand he took out the sheepskin pouch which contained Luc's flint and laid it on the mat of thorns and leaves which formed the floor of the rose-hedge.

Certain actions, certain distances are, when it is you that must travel them, very much greater than they appear. Such was the tiny fall which the sparks made to the tinder as Tomas struck steel against grey stone. He

had set many fires in his time, every night before bed until the age of fifteen, but none so hot as this.

At first he thought it wasn't going to catch. The fuel was dew-laden and in some cases had been lying for a long time, but it did begin to burn. Tomas nursed his fire to the fulcrum point, beyond which it could take care of itself, coaxing it with small twigs and grass from the nest. In a final poetic gesture he pulled a hair from his head and added it to the blaze, watching it curl and snarl, the acrid smell lost in the sweet aroma of burning rosewood. Tomas accepted several deep scratches on his arms and cheeks as he made his way forcefully from the hedge, already breathing smoke, his eyes seeping tears. The final part of the plan was simply to run, low and quick, and climb the hill to watch the drama unfold.

Tomas began his run, flat and hard, toward the tree where he had left Luc. He heard his name called. Luc's voice, not from in front but from behind. Tomas spun and fell, rolled and regained his feet. Looking back he was first struck by how quickly his work was taking effect. The fire had moved quickly upward and fifteen foot high flames now claimed the top reaches of the hedge. Rose blooms dropped to the ground in a burning rain as the upper limbs of the hedge bent, snapped and plunged backwards into the hungry blaze. Then Tomas saw Luc.

It is often something totally simple and yet totally unpredictable which undoes a great plan, or even a modest one and Tomas watched in horror as Luc stood as near as he could to the base of the blaze and called 'Tomas!'.

Tomas hesitated. The sergeants, were any awake, would be at the fire any moment and Luc would be seen. He ran back, driving the ground with his legs, and felt the intense heat of the fire. He dared not call Luc's name in case the sergeants heard. That Luc had called his could not now be helped, both of them need not be revealed.

The younger boy was almost blinded by the fire and would not see Tomas until he was close. Coughing out the smoke which invaded his lungs with each breath, Tomas watched the manor gate as he reached Luc. Two sergeants ran out, buckling their belts and fanning smoke away in order to better gauge the extent of the blaze.

Tomas shouldered Luc in the back and both hit the ground hard. The two rolled away from the fire, Luc following Tomas, and rounded the corner of the hedge. There they stood and sprinted for the relative safety of the woods which backed the manor. Reaching the trees they crouched and Tomas wiped black tears from his eyes while striving to regain his breath.

Luc lay in the bracken and looked up at Tomas. 'I'm sorry. I was scared. There were men in the grounds. I came to warn you.'

Tomas did not look at Luc when he spoke but instead kept his gaze fixed on the fire, which now consumed the entire east corner of the hedge and was almost at the gate. He bit down hard on his lip and said nothing.

Above the gate, a span of almost twenty feet, there was a thin archway of hedge fronds and thorn-bush. The fire snaked out one end of the span while one of the sergeants tried to hack it down with his sword. The work was too much and the heat too great and as he fell back the fire made the journey across the bridge and the entire hedge was doomed.

Tomas had seen enough and took Luc's hand to lead him away. He was surprised to hear himself accuse, 'Luc, you said my name.'



BY THE TIME the two parted company the news was all through the village. So was the smoke. Tomas joined the steady stream of spectators walking cautiously up to the manor to see the fire and soon most of the inhabitants of Montreuil stood by as the rose-hedge collapsed inwards into a pile of coals and ash. At one point the blaze threatened the manor itself but a few of the younger sergeants managed to keep it at bay, filling buckets from the stream. Noon came, grey and dull; the show was over and the talk had begun.

Tomas mingled and listened with satisfaction to the rumours as they evolved. Some said it was out-of-towners, others that it was one the many lovers Gilbert had jilted and a third tale conjured enemies from the Marquis's past. Tomas joined some of the conversations enthusiastically, encouraging whatever theory held sway. He was relieved

to hear no mention of his own name on anybody's lips.

As the crowd dispersed Tomas turned to leave – and walked directly into the leather apron which his father wore, dawn until sleep, at work or abroad. He did not know how long Pierro had stood there, his face golden in the glow from the hedge. Tomas's name was on his father's lips and Pierro's hand was firmly on the boy's shoulder. 'Tomas, come with me. Now.'

His father propelled Tomas away from the crowd which had begun to disperse and marched him back to the smithy. Tomas felt no fear from what was about to happen. He had more serious concerns than familiar discipline, and besides, the actions of the early morning had hardened him to the point where his father's leather belt was no more than a light switch of rush grasses. Pierro pulled the hide across the door of the smithy and turned around. Tomas cocked his head to one side and planted his hands on his hips. He waited for his father to unbuckle his belt and administer the punishment. Instead Pierro looked at his son, long and deep. Tomas found himself able to meet the gaze but the beginnings of confusion stirred in his stomach. His father had not looked at him in such a way before.

When Pierro finally spoke it was not with the tone, nor indeed the words, that Tomas expected. 'Go and say farewell to your mother.'

'My mother?'

'Did you not hear me, Tomas?' Normally his father called him 'boy'. 'She is mourning your loss already.'

'What loss?'

'They will be here soon.'

'How do you know? How could you know that?' Tomas' anger came from fear but also from losing control of the conversation.

'I have friends among the sergeants.' His father's calm certainty frightened Tomas even more. He hit back.

'Because you are their friend, because you help them to hurt all who live in Montreuil, because you are a traitor even to your own family!'

Pierro sighed, his apron rising and falling with his bellows lungs. 'No, Tomas. Because an uprising such as the one of which you dream must be planned properly and with patience, otherwise good people have to die.'

Tomas tried to grasp the meaning of this last and very unexpected answer. He failed, drowning in uncertainty, and waited desperately for his father to throw him a rope.

'Did you think, Tomas, that I bore this injustice willingly, that I befriended tyrants for my own betterment?' Tomas's head was suddenly light and he leant against the forge, warm clay against his back.

'The blood which flows in your veins, my son, was my blood before it was yours. That is the reason that I cannot be quite as angry as I might. In some ways, Lady forgive me, I am proud.'

Pierro stopped as they both heard voices from outside the smithy. The smith peered through a hole in the hide door and turned back to Tomas with a grave expression. Without saying anything he picked up his son and placed him on top of the forge like he had many times when Tomas had been a young lad, to warm the soles of his feet on winter mornings. He removed his leather gloves and handed them over. Tomas put them on without understanding why. 'Go to the grove and wait for me there. I must think what it is best to do.' The sound of several riders dismounting could be heard clearly from outside. Pierro looked hard into Tomas's eyes and then, touching the hot metal pipe which was the chimney of the forge, said one word: 'Climb.'

Tomas watched the ensuing scene from the thatched roof of the house in which he had spent his entire life. The events which occurred seemed even more unreal framed by this most normal of settings. The surprise Tomas might have expected when his father produced a sword from underneath a stack of raw iron ingots and bundled it with the apron in his right hand, never occurred. Neither did the shock register when the Marquis himself, with four of his men, stood in Tomas's front yard. He wriggled to the apex of the roof, where he himself had knitted the thatching together and saw his father approach the men. By the time the exchange began he felt himself ready to witness anything and remain unsurprised. He was wrong.

Tomas could not hear the conversation in detail and voices reached him only when they were raised. His father faced away, leather apron folded and hanging from his right hand. Tomas could hear none of Pierro's words.

The Marquis remained mounted, untouchable on his black perch, while his men spread out, their hands never far from their sword-hilts. They were clearly looking for Tomas. How they knew, with such certainty, that he was responsible for the rose-scented smoke which still clung to the valley, he could never be sure. Perhaps they had heard Luc's cry; maybe Tomas had made one too many drunken speeches on sunny festival afternoons. Whatever their source of information they were only angered by his father's denials. The Marquis stabbed the air with his gloved hand and early in the exchange augmented his gesturing by drawing the rapier which Pierro had made for him. The blade was dull in the grey light but Tomas knew that the edge would be well honed. His fingers clutched handfuls of straw and he breathed moss and dust as he watched the scene unfold. Two of the men entered the house while the others kept Pierro from following.

The Marquis rested his blade on the smith's chest and pushed to emphasize a heated point he was making. Pierro stepped back, between the two sergeants who crushed him between their shoulders. The others returned from the house, having failed to find Tomas. Both had their blades drawn; one also carried a red-hot iron from the forge. Tomas strangled a squeal.



WHEN RELATING the details of his father's last moments, as he later had to do many times, Tomas could never exactly account for what happened.

At the Marquis's signal, the two men behind Pierro grabbed his arms and, with some effort, pulled them from his side. The apron fell to the ground, revealing Pierro's sword. Gabriel shrieked hysterically and pointed with his own blade. The sergeants looked with open mouths and one pounced to retrieve the blade. He was rewarded with Pierro's boot in his face and he rolled backwards into the Marquis's horse. Tomas's father swung his huge arms in front of him and his captors crashed together, bone on bone. He twisted his hands from theirs and sprang back, claiming his sword and apron from the dirt. Pierro backed cautiously toward his house, and the sergeant who remained uninjured

followed up hard. Gabriel's man crouched and stretched his arms, willing them to remember the long lost training grounds and infantry manoeuvres of his youth. He lunged and Pierro beat the attack away with his left hand, wrapped in the heavy leather apron. With a booming cry Tomas had never heard his father utter before, the smith covered his attacker's head with his apron and smashed his knee out and away. The man fell and Pierro looked up to consider his options.

The Marquis sat safely on his horse behind his men who moved slowly forward, trapping Pierro against the wall of the smithy. Tomas crept further up the roof as his father retreated under the eaves. He couldn't see him anymore, only the expressions on the faces of his foes. At a command from the Marquis the three rushed Pierro in an unsophisticated charge. All combatants disappeared from Tomas's view and all he could see now was Gabriel's face wearing a feral snarl. One sergeant reappeared immediately, one hand grasping the other to stem the wellspring of blood which gushed there. Tomas didn't see his father die – but he heard it.

As he slid off the roof behind the house he tasted blood and realised he had bitten down on his tongue. The sound of his father dying was still in his ears, the cry and the unholy punctuation of the body meeting the ground. Tomas dropped from the straw eaves and set off for the woods at a barely controlled scamper.

Tomas wasn't sure whether they had heard him or not and he didn't care. He kept running, weaving between the trees like a fox before the chase. He rested only when he reached the grove of oaks, heavy and dark in the late afternoon sun. Tomas propped his back against the largest of the trees and slid to the ground, in the shadow of the canopy reaching down and embracing him in its lattice. Tomas cried then. He sat and cried and watched the shadow grow and twist and finally fade as the pale sun faltered. He thought about his father. He thought about their final conversation and the sound his father had made as he fell to the ground. He felt like a little boy. Tomas decided what he had to do and only then could he fall asleep.



HE WOKE IN the pre-dawn hour when the deep-green canopy of the oaks gathered the mist and distilled it into crystal drops. A drop landed on Tomas's nose and rolled down, pooling between his lips. He opened his eyes and adjusted slowly to the flat, grey light. Standing at the other end of the grove, barely visible through the curtain of fog, were four figures. Tomas drew breath. He lay still and examined the group. They did not appear to be sergeants; the outlines were too slim and lacked weapons. They were talking quietly to each other and occasionally one would glance in Tomas's direction. He lay still, nestled between the bony roots of the oak. The figures knew he was there but not that he was awake. He determined to lie still until he could learn who they were.

The four became six with the arrival of a pair from the direction of the village. The two newcomers came in at a run and spoke to the others in breathless tones. Their message was clearly urgent though Tomas could catch none of its detail. The smaller of the arrivals grabbed the shirt of the figure he addressed with both fists to add emphasis to his news. Tomas studied the silhouette of the messenger against the growing dawn. He recognized the shape of the shoulders and neck and wondered hard what it was that had roused Luc from his bed before the sun itself. By the time dawn was undeniably upon them the six had become nine, and then twelve, and Tomas could see who they were: men from the village, men he knew, farmers, shepherds and Ludo the tavern keeper. They were deep in discussion. Suddenly a decision was reached and all turned their faces toward the tree at whose feet Tomas lay.

'Tomas, wake up.'

Tomas stood slowly and looked around the group. Their faces were grim and not altogether friendly. They seemed to be sizing him up. 'That you have done this thing you have done is brave, we acknowledge.' The speaker was Paul, a lean farmer and a friend of Tomas's father.

'What we need to know is how brave you will be now.' The group seemed to move closer to Tomas, blocking the morning sun.

'What does it matter what I do?'

'It matters a great deal.'

'I don't understand any of this. I am the one who must run and hide. It is my father who is dead, Lady watch over him.'

'Did you speak with him before he gave his life to save you? Have you opened your eyes just a little?' Now Tomas was addressed by a younger man, whose anger was palpable. Gerni the miller pressed his questioning further. 'Did he give you his blessing?'

'He told me to come here.'

There was a general murmur concerning what this might mean. Some thought that Pierro's last request was of great significance and that the smith had intended and foreseen the conversation which was taking place. Others were more skeptical, citing the less than perfect relationship between father and son. Tomas was almost forgotten for a moment.

Luc stepped from the huddle and asked him in a low voice. 'What will you do?' Tomas looked at him, hard.

'Have you always been part of... part of whatever this is?'

'Don't be angry, Tomas. Your father always wanted to know what you were thinking, what you were saying.'

'And you told him?'

'Everything.'

'What was my father to these people?'

'He was our leader.'

'He was what?'

'From the very beginning.'

'Leader, leader in what?'

'Are you so very blind, Tomas?'

'What is this meeting? What are you here for?'

'To decide what should be done.' Luc looked away. He might have been about to say more but Paul turned back to Tomas.

'What would you have us do boy? What would you do?'

No response of Tomas's would have satisfied the group. Their expectations were based on their respect for and memory of a dead man, and their palpable disappointment with his replacement.

'I am going to the manor to kill the Marquis, or I will join my brave father, that is all.'

The men thought for a moment. Before one of the more senior figures could respond, Luc spoke up.

'We could come with you. Perhaps you need not die.'

'That would mean war. We can't fight soldiers with sticks, Luc.'

'The village is already full of sergeants, looking for us, and besides...'

Gerni choked a little laugh and walked past Tomas to the oak under which he had slept. The miller reached up into a hole near the bole of the tree and his hand returned with a large hessian sack, sewn shut at both ends. He lay the bundle heavily at his feet and cut a careful, longitudinal slash with his knife.

Tomas still could not understand what he was seeing as the bright blades spilled onto the grass. Something about the simple, elegant ironwork was familiar but a part of him still refused to understand. 'Where did these come from?'

'Your father, boy. Pierro forged these over years of crafty, secret work. An ingot of iron here, a few spare hours there. Paid for by the Marquis and crafted by his own smith. Intended for his downfall. There aren't quite enough but we will have to make do. That is, unless you have a better idea.' The bitterness in Paul's speech cut Tomas and his eyes stung with salt.

'My father?'

'Your father.'

The men distributed the weapons and made final repairs to the leather handles. They sharpened the blades on stones among the trees which seemed to be too well placed in the grove to have lain there by chance. Others spent the day practicing, or preparing a meal for the group. By nightfall they were ready. There had been no discussion, no decision and there was no plan, but a general consensus had spread through the group that they would move at night. It was agreed that the sergeants would know something was up but would not be anywhere close to ready for exactly what was. Tomas felt unable to claim a sword when others were without them, and he gripped his knife as if someone was trying to wrest it from his grasp.



THE FIRES WERE well and truly out around the manor and the huge house lay strangely naked in the moonlight when the mob arrived. They hid at the edge of the woods and watched for long enough

to establish that four sergeants were out in the grounds, patrolling, and that fires burned in many of the manor's hearths. What they didn't know was how many of the sergeants remained in the village and how many were in the barracks. Facing all the armed men at once they would be fatally outnumbered. Their only hope was to deal with their enemy piecemeal. The distance between the forest and the manor, only about a third of a mile, seemed an un-crossable chasm of open ground.

Tomas heard himself give what sounded like an order and thought only later about how easily it had come to him. 'This way. Follow me.'

Tomas, Paul, Gerni and Luc went ahead, the others waiting in the woods for their signal. The four scouts crept as far as the scar of the hedge and hit the ground. Nothing remained but a few twisted black bones of the great growth and a two-foot deep ditch of coals and ash. Tomas felt the warmth of it on his face, even now, and took some comfort from that. They waited for two of the sergeants to pass further away and then Tomas demonstrated his idea. He found a deep pile of ashes and took a double handful. With this he painted his face and clothes black and grey and almost disappeared into the background of the burnt hedge. The others followed suit and the four crept up the hedge-line, keeping low, almost invisible towards the main gate where the two men stood guard. The gates looked forlorn and foolish with their stone gateposts standing alone and no hedge to justify them.

Tomas, Paul, Gerni and Luc crept as close as they dared and halted again, looking briefly into each other's eyes and waiting for what must come next. Tomas looked at Luc's blackened face and saw his brown eyes brighter than the ash, wide and fearful. Gerni wriggled over to Tomas, making too much noise for Tomas's liking.

'What's your plan now, boy?'

Tomas didn't like the diminutive but could only agree that the doubt on the older man's part was justified. He thought quickly.

'I will gain their attention while you and Paul rush them from behind.' A sound enough plan.

'What about me?' Luc whispered.

'You can go back and bring the others to the hedge, what's left of it.' Luc was clearly relieved by this job. He pulled his sword quietly from his belt.

'Give me your knife, Tomas. You will have more need of this.'

Tomas took the sword and felt its cool weight. He looked briefly at the simple, sturdy ironwork in the moonlight and thought of his father. 'Not now', he told himself, 'not now.'

They watched Luc crawl away down the hedge-line and melt into the black scar, one more grey lump, and turned to their allotted task. Paul looked up at the moon.

'Time to move, Tomas.' Tomas was grateful not to be called 'boy' this one time. 'How do you mean to get their attention?'

'Be ready and you will know soon enough.' Tomas wished he had a better answer but he did not. Paul, however, took his brusqueness as evidence that he had everything under control. Paul and Gerni moved quietly into position.

Tomas crept toward the front of the hedge and the gate. He could see the two men clearly now, he even thought he knew one of their names. Alain, an older sergeant, had come to the smithy more than once to have his armour adjusted to suit his expanding girth. Tomas willed a clever idea to come into his head but none did, so he fell back on the only notion he had. He stood up, walked several steps away from the hedge and began to stroll toward the gate. He tried to whistle but his mouth was shaking so much that he couldn't form the proper shape.



ALAIN AND HIS colleague didn't see him until he was quite close. 'Who's there?'

'It's me, Tomas, I've come to see the Marquis.'

'You've what?'

'Gabriel. I've come to pay him a visit.' The soldiers peered into the night to ascertain whether Tomas was alone. Alain stepped forward a little and peered at the boy in the darkness.

'Let me get this right. You've come to see the Marquis. We've been looking for you all the last night and day, and you waltz up here, bold as you please, asking to see the boss?'

'That's right.'

'Well you got balls on you, boy, even if you don't have brains.' In a strange and somewhat terrifying development to Tomas, he was beginning to enjoy himself.

'Please don't call me "boy". My name is Tomas.' He hoped Paul and Gerni would not take too much longer and his ears were rewarded with the sound of a stealthy footfall. If he could just hold the attention of the guards for a moment longer... Alain's companion joined the conversation.

'Well, boy, the Marquis will be very pleased to see you, but not with that sword at your hip. Where did you get it?' Tomas had forgotten the weapon stuffed through the rope which held his pants. Tomas still couldn't see Paul or Gerni but decided that if they didn't arrive soon he was in serious trouble anyway.

'This sword?' One last stall.

'Yeah, boy, that sword. What are you going to do with it?'

'I'm going to stick this sword into Gabriel's soft belly and watch his bright blood spill out.'

The men stopped for a second and looked at each other. They reached for their own blades and Tomas dragged his from his belt. For a brief moment he found himself facing two experienced fighters with a weapon he had never wielded before. He bit his tongue and opened the wound from the day before, tasting iron.

Had Paul and Gerni synchronised their attacks a little better it would have been over instantly. As it was, the younger sergeant went down under a double handed stroke to his neck, not pretty swordplay by any means but brutally effective. Alain had a breath after this had happened to turn and put his arm in the way of Gerni's upward thrust. The tip of the blade pierced his much repaired chain-mail vest at the bottom of the ribcage and both men fell to the ground. Alain was a big man and had taken wounds before, though not for many years. He punched Gerni in the mouth with a mailed glove and the miller rolled away spitting blood and teeth.

Paul was still engaged and so Tomas grabbed his weapon tightly and approached the panting Alain. The fat soldier was having trouble getting his sword out of its scabbard which had fallen underneath him and he was concentrating on this task when Tomas arrived. He looked up at Tomas's face. 'Now, boy...'

Tomas stamped hard on his sword hand and kicked at his face. Looking down at the older man, cradling his broken fingers against his bleeding face Tomas paused, but he quickly realised he had come much too far for remorse. He reversed the sword in both hands and struck downward as hard as he could. The brief battle was over and the three men fought to regain their breaths.

Hardly had they drawn three lungfuls each when they heard Luc cry, 'Tomas!'

The distance and the dark made it hard to discern the situation but this is how it seemed to the three at the gate. Luc must have run into the other patrol and now fled across the open ground toward the forest with the two sergeants on his heels. The unarmoured Luc was faster but was done for if the soldiers caught him.

Paul grabbed Tomas, 'Quickly! We must help.' Tomas was torn.

'No, wait.'

'There will be more men.'

'We knew we'd have to fight. Wait.'



LUC ALMOST reached the eaves of the forest before he fell. He rolled and tried to stand but he had hurt his leg or his ankle and he pitched forward again. The men were on him. From the trees which offered him safety came a roar and eight villagers sprang out, charging toward the soldiers who stood over Luc. The sergeants did a quick head count and attempted a rapid about face. The farmers caught them and Tomas lost the details in a whirl of bodies and blades. He counted eight men standing at the end of it and that seemed to be a comforting thing. He couldn't tell if any of them were Luc. A door at the end of the house burst open and six armed sergeants carrying torches ran out and down the hill towards the forest. Paul gripped Tomas's arm again.

'They need us. Them's trained soldiers.' The door stood open and firelight spilled out.

'We'll never get a better chance to get inside the house.' Tomas heard the sound of raised voices from the barracks on the other side of the manor.

'They'll be cut to pieces.'

'It's now or never.'

In the end Paul ran back to help the others and Tomas and Gerni made a dash for the house.

They ran hard, bent double, and plunged without hesitation into the fire-lit kitchen whose door stood open. Tomas led and Gerni followed. Had they stopped to think at the door Tomas might never have found the courage to go in at all. The kitchen was empty as they discovered after picking themselves up off the wooden floor. Gerni had slid all the way under the table and stopped against a sack of flour. A cloud of white snow settled in his hair. Tomas's elbow caught on the door frame and sent him spinning against the stone trough in the corner. He splashed his face and combed a handful of water through his hair with his fingers. If he strained his ears Tomas could hear the sounds of a battle from outside in the grounds. Inside the house it was silent. Gerni and Tomas shared a 'you first' look before gripping their swords and going further into the house.

Heavy carpets lay on the floor and hung on the walls eating the sound of their footfalls so that Tomas and Gerni rounded a corner and found themselves almost seated at a table with two sergeants before either group was aware of the other. One of the men was almost asleep and the other strained to read by the guttering stub of a candle. A bottle lay on its side, resting against the book. Their position stood sentry over the main staircase of the house which swept up to the private apartments of the Marquis. The four men looked at each other, unsure of what might happen next.

Had Gerni or Tomas been a competent assassin the outcome would have been simple and quick but the struggle in the dark at the gate had not prepared them for striking in cold blood. The sergeant with the book, a young man with reading spectacles, woke the other with one hand while folding his spectacles and replacing them with his sword in the other. The sleeper stirred and made an inquisitive snort as his eyes opened. He grasped the situation quite speedily and stood, clearing space as he drew his blade.

Tomas and Gerni circled away from each other a little and exchanged a nervous glance. The odds were hardly even. The sergeants were veterans and the older one wore armour, Tomas and Gerni were farmers with weapons they had never, until recently, even held in their hands. Neither side seemed willing to make the first move. Tomas realised that the

sergeants had everything to gain by waiting, and he much to lose. It was unlikely the battle outside would go his way and soon more soldiers would return to the house. Tomas swallowed the urge to run and hide. An indistinct shout made its way in from outside and he could wait no longer. The soldiers continued to stand at the table, blocking the stairs. Gerni hung back, the point of his sword wandering aimlessly in front of his face.

In what he was sure would be his last and most foolish action, Tomas leapt forward with his sword in front of him, almost closing his eyes in silent supplication to the memory of his father.



YOU NEVER HEAR the sound which wakes you. He was fairly sure something was amiss in his house, however, and so Marquis Gabriel sat up, letting the satin sheet slide down his naked, hairless chest. He heard something then, a thud and a crash from outside his room. He dressed quickly but clumsily, missing the aid of his dresser who had left for the evening. In the polished silver mirror he frowned at his paunch as he did every morning. He had to admit to himself that he was not the lean and dangerous man he had once been, but there wasn't much that could conceivably be in his house which could cause him to raise a sweat. He buckled on his rapier, which hadn't struck a blow in all its elegant life, and composed himself, risking one more glance in the looking glass before unbolting the door and walking onto the landing.

At the top of the stairs stood two boys. One, the elder of the two, was bleeding seriously from a cut in his cheek. Gabriel looked to the bottom of the staircase. Two of his men lay there, probably dead, certainly on the way. On the table the stub of a candle illuminated one of his books, some spectacles and an empty bottle which would once have contained port, his port.

He snorted. His useless soldiers spent more time drunk than sober. Gabriel's eyes climbed the stairs and settled again on the boys. They held swords in their hands. They held them far from their bodies, as if the blood on the blades might poison them. A good

swordsman loved his blade, especially when bloody. Gabriel walked quietly towards the pair. One of them, the younger one, yelled something indistinct and charged along the balcony toward him. The other, the bleeding one, stayed put. Gabriel sank into a fencing stance and waited patiently. The charger realised he was alone about three quarters of the way to his objective and spun around, exposing his back. The older boy was clearly too scared to charge; clever boy.

Gabriel lunged forward, hopping on his back foot first for extra distance, and whipped his blade across the younger boy's back. It raised a welt from waist to shoulder and the lad fell, screaming. Gabriel gently broke his nose by stepping on the back of his head with his boot heel and walked over to attend to the frightened one.

He seemed to find a morsel of courage as he squared up and faced the Marquis rather than ran down the stairs as he clearly wanted to. Gabriel feinted low and the boy followed like a trout to a fly. The Marquis's knee connected with his face and the lad cart-wheeled backward and down the stairs, taking every third one as if he were eager to reach the bottom. He lay still and Gabriel turned around.

The young boy had got up again. Bravo. Gabriel assumed a dueling stance with all of the proper flourishes and detail, and signaled as was proper that his opponent might begin when he was ready. As the boy looked into his eyes, with some anger it must be said, Gabriel noted with amusement that it was the wretch they had all been looking for. How fitting that he might kill him here, with the sword made by his own father. Gabriel doubted that the child would appreciate the irony.

The Marquis set about playing with his victim a little. He stepped out of the way of the increasingly desperate attacks, spinning and pirouetting like a dancer. In between each of the boy's sorties he gave him a little cut, on the face or the arm, with the tip of the blade. Eventually Gabriel tired of the game and it occurred to him he should find out if there were other intruders in his house. He imagined with a certain amount of grim glee the retribution he would exact from whoever was responsible for this little insurrection. He turned to his opponent.

The boy lunged, straight and unimaginative, slow and clumsy. Gabriel was an enthusiastic user of the stop-hit, a manoeuvre in which one fencer, instead of parrying his opponent's offence, attacks

instead, hitting before the original blow lands. He employed it now, bringing his blade inside the boy's, and placing the tip accurately at the base of his ribcage. The golden-hilted rapier cut the boy a little, bent – and then snapped.

Gabriel had a brief, very brief, moment to comprehend his mortal danger before the boy's sword penetrated deep into his stomach. Both fell to the floor and blood poured from two wounds. Only the boy managed to stand, however.

It occurred to Gabriel, only in his very last moment, that in truth he had never fully trusted the smith, and had been unsurprised when he had discovered that the smith's son was a trouble-maker.

Like father, like son he thought, as he died.



THE AFTERMATH of the battle at the manor was a sad time in Montreuil. The surviving sergeants, which turned out to be most of them, drifted away when it was discovered that the Marquis would no longer be paying their wages. One stayed on and married a village girl, when their affair was made public, and another downed his weapons and installed himself at the mill, now that Gerni was gone.

Tomas didn't stay long in Montreuil and not all were sad when he left. Though nobody was sorry to see the end of the Marquis, many thought that the cost in lives was too steep, and that things had been bearable as they were. Tomas didn't say where he was going, though perhaps he told his mother.

The manor house stood mostly empty at one end of the village and fell quickly into disrepair. It became custom in Montreuil, when a roof was leaking, or a hinge fell off a door, for the villager in need to make a trip to the manor and to take what he sought to make the repair.

The rose hedge slowly grew back, but was kept to a modest height, perhaps the waist of a tall man, and on festival days in honour of the Lady the village was covered in a garland of roses.

It was purely speculation on the behalf of some villagers that the new flowers were brighter and more fragrant than those which had grown there before. ❀



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Mama's Boys

A Nathan
Creed
Story



by Jonathan Green

WITH THE SPANG of metal on metal a bullet ricocheted off the girder next to the bounty hunter's head. Pushing his battered, wide-brimmed hat firmly onto his head, Nathan Creed sprinted for the shelter of a pile of crates, a large-muzzled stub gun in each hand. A trail of fire chased him across the warehouse wall as one hot shot charge after another blasted from the shotgun in the Scavvy's hands. Still two metres from the safety of the fungus-wood crates Creed flung himself forward. He landed in a roll as a round exploded against the wall at the spot where a split-second before his head had been. The tails of his long, leather coat flapping about him, the bounty hunter came to a halt in a crouch, the cluster of skull and crossbones bounty seals, attesting to successfully collected bounties, glittering in the globe-light of the killer's warehouse hideout.

Where did the Ripperjack-loving scavver get hot shot ammunition from? Creed wondered. Probably his last unfortunate victim, after he'd skinned and eaten him!

From his hiding place, Creed peered through the gap between two containers. He could just make out the scavvy's pockmarked face peering over the top of an oil-drum at the back of his camp. In front of the oil-drum lay all that remained of the murdering cannibal's last victim. Creed had interrupted the scavvy serial killer as he was in the process of skinning the last hired gun who had come looking for him.

Now Creed was caught in a shoot-out with Django Kaynn, youngest of the Kaynn Clan Gang and vicious as a milliasaur on slaughter, in the middle of the abandoned warehouse dome where the scavvy had made his lair. A network of rusted air-conditioning ducts and pipes were suspended from the warehouse ceiling by rusted chains. From a number of these Django Kaynn had displayed his curing trophies. In all the scavvy had killed, skinned and eaten sixteen men, women and children, and those were only the ones the Guilders knew about. Crouched behind the crates, reloading his guns by touch alone without looking at what he was doing, Creed counted at least five skins more than there should have been.

Django Kaynn, you sure are one sick son-of-a-sumpsucker, Creed thought as he slammed home the last dum-dum round into the chamber.

'Well, girls,' the bounty hunter said quietly in his distinctive Underhive drawl, addressing the guns he held in his hands, 'we're not going to get him while he's holed-up tighter than a lashworm in a bore hole.'

The problem was that, while the scavvy cannibal was trying to kill the bounty hunter, and no doubt eat him, Creed needed Django Kaynn alive. He looked up at the tangle of pipework above him again. *But there's always a way,* he thought.

'Django Kaynn,' Creed called out, 'I'm taking you in!'

'Yeah?' came a high-pitched snarl of a voice from the other side of the building. 'Yous an' whose watchmen bounty-man?'

'Just me and my girls!' the bounty hunter replied, jumping to his feet and letting fire with both barrels at his target.

In a shower of sparks, the rusted chains holding up one end of an old pipe shattered. The heavy metal tube swung downwards and over the top of the oil-drum, smashing into the scavvy's head and sending him flying.

With calm, measured steps, Nathan Creed strode over to where the killer's prone body lay among the debris of the firefight, blood running from a jagged gash on his forehead. Django had let go of the stub gun when the pipe had hit him and it was now lost among the barrels and boxes. Having checked for any hidden weapons and cuffed the scavvy, only then did the bounty hunter check for a pulse. It was there, strong as his own.

Good, only knocked out, Creed noted. Holstering his stub guns and hauling the dead weight of the unconscious scavvy over his shoulder the bounty hunter left the warehouse lair.



DJANGO KAYNN OPENED his eyes. He blinked a few times, in an attempt to clear his blurred vision, and tried to sit up. He immediately regretted the decision as grey stars flashed inside his

aching head. He lay back again, moaning and screwed his eyes shut. It felt as if a pile driver had been pounded against his skull. Cautiously, and without opening his eyes, he felt for the egg-sized swelling he must have on his forehead. Sure enough, there it was. He moaned miserably again.

'You're awake then,' drawled a voice that was little more than a husky whisper.

Django tried to sit up again and this time succeeded, despite more black supernovae exploding within his brain. He was sitting in a cell, which was in fact part of a larger room divided in two by thick iron bars. On his side of the barrier were a plain pallet bed and a slop bucket. A small, square, grilled window shed fractured globe-light into the lock-up. Beyond the bars there was another bed, although this one had a thin mattress, a table and chair. The keys to the cell door hung from a hook on the wall, well out of reach.

Leaning against the jamb of the open doorway, one booted heel resting on the peeling frame, was a tall man, wearing a long leather coat and a battered hat. Striking a match against the doorframe, the man lit the cheroot in his mouth and took a long drag on the cigar. As the blue smoke escaped from his nostrils the man fixed Django with a steely gaze from under the shadowy brim of his hat.

'Wheres am I?' the degenerate cannibal demanded.

'Where's it look like?' the figure at the door answered bluntly. 'But if you mean which town – Sulphur Creek. You might have heard of it. You killed eight of its citizens including the entire Lanzo family, you murdering sewer snake!'

Slowly Django's memory re-engaged and he pieced together the events that had brought him here and the person responsible for his present predicament – the bounty hunter!

'You gonna be sorry you didn't kill me when yous had the chance, dead man!' the scavvy threatened. 'I gonna bite out yer spleen and feed it to ya!'

The bounty hunter grinned, gesturing at the iron bars and firmly locked cell door. 'I don't think so,' he said quietly.

'Whys did you take me in alive, gun-boy?' Django asked, genuine curiosity provoking his question.

The bounty hunter took a yellowing piece of parchment from inside his coat and, carefully unfolding it, read it out loud. 'Django Kaynn, scavvy Outlaw. Wanted alive for murder and cannibalism. Bounty 50 credits.' The man re-folded the poster and stowed it away in the folds of his long coat. 'If you were dead, I wouldn't get paid. It's that simple.'

'Well,' spluttered the scavvy, trying to recover some of his earlier bravado, 'you realise that when my brothers hear 'bout this you is spider-food? They'll come for you, bounty-man!'

Pushing the brim of his hat up with the barrel of a stub gun the bounty hunter replied coolly, 'I'm counting on it.'



A METHANE GREEN MIST hung over the Sumpscum Acid Marshes, a smothering blanket of toxic gas and airborne pathogens. A hundred square kilometres of polluted waterways, festering fungus beds and briars of rampant wire weed, the industrial marshland wound among the ruinous domes of Hive Bottom eighty metres below Mercury Falls and ten kilometres below the gleaming spires of Imperial House Helmaur. In fact, the closest the nobility of the Spire ever got to this Emperor-forsaken place was in the snakeskin bracelets they wore, encrusted with crystalline spider eyes: both species flourished in the effluent-charged Acid Marshes.

Nathan Creed gazed out over the rooftops of the shanty houses, from the higher ground on which the lock-up stood, and through the gloom towards the ammonia-reeking swamps. Wreathed in choking, sulphurous fumes, with the small barely habitable settlement of Sulphur Creek at its easternmost point, the Sumpscum Acid Marshes were home to sludge jellies, milliasaurs and worse. Much worse.

Everyone from Toxic Sump to Cable Pass had heard of the Kaynn Clan Gang. More degenerate a 'family' of scavvies you couldn't hope to meet this side of the

Effluous River. Ruled over by the matriarchal, homicidal Mama Kaynn, the scavvy gang had their hideout deep in the Sumpscum. Only the Kaynn Clan was twisted enough to claim the marshes as their territory. In fact they were probably the only ones mutated enough to be able to survive in such a toxic environment in the first place.

So horrible and notorious were their crimes that the Kaynn Clan had become a nightmare fairytale parents used to naughty children to behave: 'If you do that one more time, Mama Kaynn will come for you!' Scavvies, mutants and scabies made up the Kaynn Clan and their loyalty to each other and Mama Kaynn was unswerving. All of them were killers. They killed for food, they killed for fun and they all loved their dear old 'mum'. Creed didn't want to even contemplate what Mama Kaynn must have got up to, out there in the swamps, to produce such a brood of degenerate mutants.

The citizens of Sulphur Creek knew the Kaynn Clan all too well. Eking out a living by extracting industrial strength acids and hydro-carbons from the marshes, which were then sold on Uphive, the citizens of the small settlement had come to an agreement with the Kaynn Clan long ago. If they kept out of the swamp and made their regular payment of flesh the scavvy gang would hopefully leave them alone in return and prey on some other poor unfortunates.

So what if from time to time a chem prospector went missing or a foolish child strayed into the effluent bogs, never to be seen again? If a man was lucky, he could make his fortune in Sulphur Creek. From time to time the extraction process would reveal traces of a rich mineral deposit in the swamp. The precious minerals could then be filtered out and refined. The profit from such a lucky strike was enough to buy a man out of Sulphur Creek – sometimes out of the Underhive itself. Stories of those who had succeeded before were enough to keep the poor and desperate who remained behind risking everything, their lives especially, on the off chance that they might make their fortune. It was greed and the promise of easy money that kept people in this stinking chem pit, pure and simple. Besides, Sulphur Creek was untroubled by

interfering and expensive watchmen or Underhive gangs vying for possession of the petroleum processing stills. And, as many an old timer was heard to say when there was yet another disappearance, 'Worse things happen Uphive!'

But the Guilders didn't see it that way. Mass murder and extortion weren't good for trade, not unless they were implemented by the Merchant's Guild itself, in which case they were viable tools to encourage greater demand and profitability.

Many had tried to bring Mama Kaynn's gang in before but they had all gone about it the wrong way. Nathan Creed smiled to himself, lit another cheroot and waited.



THE MUTANT SLIPPED along the oily waterways as if he had been born to it, which indeed he had. Viper-toads plopped into the black pools at his approach and fen snakes darted away from the ripples created in his wake. It could have only been natural instinct that told them to avoid the reptilian creature, in case they end up as a snack, but instinct was right. However, on this occasion Tuntan Kaynn was hunting other prey.

With only his limpid, ophidian eyes and the top of his grey scaly head visible above the surface of the water, the mutant glided along the maze of flooded channels, propelled by infrequent flicks of his salamander tail. Nitro beetles sung in the green gloom while rust mites skittered over the red-flecked stump of a corroded pipe protruding from a clump of purple-blue fronds. A chorus of croaks and strange chittering cries rose from the swamp as the creature passed.

Tuntan paused and blinked slowly. In the distance ahead through the reeds, he could see the lights of Sulphur Creek flickering like marsh-lights over the stagnant pools of the Sumpscum. The mutant hissed angrily. That was where the cursed bounty hunter held his 'brother' captive like a caged rat, or so the old trader had told them. He'd had no reason to doubt the man: what was the

point in lying when half your intestines lay on the ground in front of you?

The glow-globes dotted across the roof of the dome had faded as Hive Primus entered its night-cycle. It made no difference to Tuntan: the Acid Marshes lay under a permanent pall of darkness that varied between an all-pervading gloom to a total absence of any light at all, other than the tiny glowing tail-tips of the phosphorflies.

The half-scaly crossbreed pulled itself out onto the bank of the rivulet and on webbed feet padded almost silently towards the shantytown. With the proportions of a man and the added bulk and rough hide of the Necromundan sub-species known as scaly, Tuntan Kaynn made an imposing figure as he crept through the night, but there was no one to see him. The inhabitants of Sulphur Creek knew better than to leave the safety of their homes during the hours of darkness.

Nearing the houses he reached for the axe, strapped to his ridged back with ripperjack leather bands, with his right hand. A boneless tentacle writhed in place of a left arm. This in no way debilitated the mutant though. With the sinuous tentacle alone he could squeeze the life from a man.

Rounding a corner the mutant froze, his breathing almost imperceptible as he surveyed the scene at the end of the alleyway. The street rose towards the square on top of the rise in the middle of the settlement. At its edge stood the small white building of the town lock-up. The door stood open and through the gloom Tuntan could make out a long-coated figure sitting on a chair in the opening. The man wore a wide-brimmed hat that hid his face. The angle of the hat suggested to Tuntan that the man was asleep, his chin resting on his chest.

Cold blood boiled at the thought of his little brother, Django, languishing inside the lock-up for the last five days. But Tuntan didn't let his anger overwhelm his natural cunning. His swamp-dweller appearance belied a malign intelligence: Tuntan was no brainless plague zombie. Even if the bounty hunter was asleep at his post, and even if he could cover the ground between them as quietly as a shreel-shrew, he didn't want to risk giving the hired gun

any warning of his approach. After all, he must have been good to bring in Django the cannibal in the first place.

Stealthily the mutant made his way between the buildings of the settlement until he could approach the bounty hunter's sentry post from behind. Pressed against the back wall of the jail he couldn't hear a sound coming from inside, either from his brother or his captor. Slipping around the side of the lock-up, in the same fluid motion Tuntan hurled the throwing axe through the open doorway. With a splintering crack the axe struck the back of the chair. In a moment of dreadful realisation the mutant clearly saw the long leather coat draped over the back of the chair, the folds of its tails positioned in front of the chair legs and the empty, knee-length boots behind. The hat, balanced on top, completed the illusion.

And in the gloom at the back of the jailhouse, in a sleeveless undershirt and tanned britches, his stubble almost as long as the close-cropped greying hair on his head, crouched the bounty hunter. Standing stock-still in the open and unarmed, with unblinking eyes Tuntan Kaynn looked into the barrels of two primed stub guns.

The tentacled mutant took the first two rounds in the chest and staggered back at their impact. A normal man would have been killed outright by such a shot but Tuntan's scaly heritage served him well. However, the bounty hunter had started with two fully loaded weapons and didn't intend to stop there. The third bullet hit him in the shoulder, spinning him round, as a fourth blasted a hole in his side.

The bounty hunter rose from his crouched position and, kicking the chair aside, strode out of the lock-up, muscles tensed against the explosive recoil of the handguns, as he fired round after round into the scavvy ganger.

Tuntan collapsed against the onslaught. Sprawled in the dust, the ground turning green with his blood, the mutant fixed the square-jawed bounty hunter with his yellow, snake-like eyes. His mouth opened and a forked tongue flicked between the thin, grey lips. He tried to speak. He wanted to tell his killer that he too was a dead man, that it was only a matter of time

before the rest of the Kaynn Clan caught up with him, but all that came with his final breath was a dying hiss.

The creature's saucer eyes glazed over and his sluggish, cold blood came to a standstill in his veins. Tuntan Kaynn was dead.



Nathan Creed marched back in to the jailhouse and grinned at the gagged and bound form of Django Kaynn, cowering in the corner of his cell.

'It's amazing how long you can stay awake for with regular doses of a little Spur,' he said.

Righting the chair the bounty hunter lifted his coat from it and put it on. Picking up his hat he gave it a quick dusting down before placing it firmly back on his head.

'It seems you were right,' he said, addressing Django again. 'The invitation has been sent out, we know they're coming, so now the party can really begin. Eh, girls?' he added with a nod to the smoking stubbers holstered at his waist.



The fungus-wood raft came to rest against an outcrop of firmer ground at the easternmost edge of the swamp and the motley party disembarked. Swathed in mouldering rags, caked with filth and carrying primitive weapons, it was immediately apparent to an observer that these were scavvy. The devolved dregs of humanity that had become so mutated by the toxic environments they lived in, far from the settlements of the rest of the populace of Necromunda's Underhive, that the term 'human' no longer applied to them.

There were four of them altogether. A large brute of a man, for want of a better description, led the way towards the cluster of buildings huddled together where the ground rose steeply domewards. A collection of rotting, rickety jetties formed a

wharf around the sulphurous yellow channel that gave the settlement its name.

The large man stopped and the mangy dog at his heels growled from one of its throats, the other head sniffing the air. Such genetic aberrations were not uncommon in the really badly contaminated domes this close to Hive Bottom. Behind the scavvy the others came to a halt: a stalking figure shrouded in a flea-ridden rat's skin; a short creature whose rags covered him completely, apart from his withered, boil-covered hands; a wild-haired, semi-naked man with a cord threaded with finger bones rattling around his neck.

A large, rainbow-winged phosphorfly hummed over their heads. The short, robed scavvy watched the insect with glowing coal eyes from inside its cowl for a moment. A long, sticky tongue suddenly darted out of the hood, snaring the phosphorfly on its tip before being retracted inside the cowl. A wet crunching sound followed.

'Don't spoil yer appetite, Buboe,' the leader of the party said, his speech slurred by the twisted lips of his malformed mouth. 'Mama's gonna be cooking up a feast tonight.'

'When's Gator gonna get 'ere?' asked the Ratskin.

'Big brother's on 'is way,' the large brute answered. 'Don't you worry.'

'But he's gonna miss all the fun,' said the wild-haired scavvy, hopping from one foot to the other.

'Why's that then?' asked Buboe, picking a piece of phosphorfly wing from between its teeth.

'Cos we're gonna get that sump-sucker first and make broth from his brains. Oh yes we are!'

'Okay, split up,' their leader commanded. 'First one to get 'im gets first pick of the juicy bits.'

The scavvy band broke up but all eventually heading for the settlement from different directions. The two-headed mutant hound remained where it was, scratching in the dirt for some buried morsel that only it could smell. Its master turned back and snorted barked angrily in annoyance: 'Ripper! Heel!'

CREEPING SPIDER MADE his way silently along the back street, a blunderbuss clutched in his hands. He could move with the stealth of his hive-born arachnid namesake. He knew how to walk through a giant spider's web without triggering the vibration sensitive trigger thread. There wasn't a better scout or tracker this side of Fester Hole. 'Half-ratskin but all stealth,' was how he liked to describe himself.

Creeping Spider froze, feeling the hard muzzle pressed against the small of his back.

'You looking for me?' came a slow drawl, little more than a whisper.

Sweat beaded on Creeping Spider's forehead and trickled into his eyes. He blinked several times to clear the salty moisture from his vision. The ratskin was starting to panic.

'Y-you wouldn't shoot a man in the back, w-would you?' he asked, and held his breath as he waited for a response.

'Nope, that I wouldn't,' came the reply.

Creeping Spider let out the air in his lungs in a huge sigh of relief. If the game were up he'd rather spend the rest of his time in a Guilder jail than dying in the street filled with enough lead to drop a Scaly.

'So turn around.'

'Wha-?' Creeping Spider felt a strong hand on his shoulder yank him backwards as a boot planted firmly on his backside pushed him forward. His body spun round.

He stumbled backwards, trying to keep his balance. Before he could bring his blunderbuss to bear Creeping Spider was dropped by a single gunshot to the forehead.



Buboe Kaynn halted. The shot had come from somewhere over to his right. Cautiously he changed direction, making his way between the derelict warehouses around the wharf towards the centre of Sulphur Creek. The diesel stink of the swamp was strong here. An ammonia fog was rising from the Sumpscum Acid Marshes, the result of a

chemical reaction that regularly occurred after a day's fuel-extraction carried out by the townsfolk. Tendrils of toxic green mist snaked around the stilts of the wharf buildings and oozed along the streets. The chemical stench would mask his own somewhat pungent odour as he closed in on the bounty hunter.

Sulphur Creek was like a ghost town. The locals were all too well aware of the current situation and the whole heap of trouble the stranger had brought on himself. They knew the swamp-folk better than any outlands bounty hunter. They knew not to upset the Kaynn Clan and if the Kaynn Clan was on the warpath, they knew not to get in the way. At the first sign of trouble the entire populace had retreated to their hovels. The out-of-town bounty hunter and self-styled watchman could fight his own battles and in the ensuing fight they knew who their money was on. The town butcher, who doubled as the town undertaker, had already taken Creed's measurements.

Hearing a crunch behind him Buboe Kaynn spun round in time to catch sight of a shadowy form disappear among the gantries and chemical reclamation tanks on the raised piers of the wharf. Reaching into a bag at his waist the diseased scavvy pulled out a small, taped up flask and tested its weight in his hand. He had collected the industrial waste for his latest batch of tox bombs from the outlet pipe of an old reactor whose core had melted down years ago. The virulent poison had made even his weeping sores itch but the first test he had carried out on a giant hive rat had produced results better than he could have hoped for.

And then he saw his prey, or at least his shadow. Although the bounty hunter was hidden around the corner of a still shed, a glow globe somewhere behind him cast his tall, unmistakable shadow on the wall opposite. If Buboe fired his scatter gun now the shrapnel blast would be wasted so the tox bomb it was. He had a preference for their very unpleasant form of death-dealing anyway.

With a practised arm Buboe hurled the flask at the jetty.

The crude grenade bounced off the wall opposite him and smashed a few feet from where Creed was standing, splashing the

planks of the pier with glowing radioactive gunk. The corrosive slime quickly ate its way through the wood, a thick cloud of noxious gas rising from the decking.



TOX BOMB! Creed thought and with lightning reactions pulled the compact respirator from a coat pocket, placing it over his mouth and nose. Flicking his photo-visor down from inside the brim of his hat he peered through the toxic smoke.

Thanks to the enhanced optics of the visor he was able to see the scavvy through the gas-cloud. He was shouldering a crude weapon made up of a number of short, tubular barrels bound to a ceramite stock. It was the scavvies' way to construct their firearms from whatever they could scavenge in the badzones, that and steal them from their victims.

What had originally been intended to hinder him Creed was now able to turn to his advantage. Under cover of the thick smoke he dropped off the pier and ducked under the jetty.

Now we'll see how you like it, Creed said to himself.



THE SCAVVY WAS in position by the time the deadly pollutant cloud began to dissipate, his scatter gun trained on the spot where the bounty hunter should now be doubled up in a coughing fit, choked by the poisonous fumes of his tox bomb. But there was nobody there.

The report of a stubber rang out around the wharf. Buboe also heard the crack of shattering pottery. A split second later he felt the hot acid pain of his hip being eaten away. In stupefied silence he looked down at the bag hanging from his waist. Gas was already pouring from the bullet hole in the sacking and through the ragged hole where the corrosive contents of the shattered tox bombs had burnt it away. Where his right hip had been, a smoking hole in his ragged

robes revealed a gaping wound that continued to expand as the concentrated toxic waste dissolved everything it came into contact with.

As the gas-cloud swallowed him the skin of his withered hands began to melt, yellow-white pustules bursting, open sores bubbling. The acrid smell of the acidic slime eating into his own body filled his nostrils. Then he found his voice.

Screaming, the flesh sloughing from his face and hands, the scavvy turned to see the bounty hunter standing in the shadows beneath the raised walkway, the smouldering tip of cheroot glowing in the dark. Enveloped in a yellow-green cloud, the last thing Buboe Kaynn saw before his bones dissolved was the white flash of a grin on the grimy, stubbled face of Nathan Creed.



THE BOUNTY HUNTER stepped into the side street, flicking the tails of his leather coat back over his holstered guns, his hands hovering over the butts, fingers itching to pull the triggers.

'Dead end, swamp boy,' Creed called out to the hunched brutish figure at the end of the closed off alleyway. 'And I mean dead!'

'That you bounty-man?' the figure sneered.

'Well it's not your mama, scuzzhead,' Creed retorted. 'Looks you've got the advantage. Now you must be-'

'Ezra Kaynn,' the scavvy replied, his malformed mouth slurring the words.

A low, menacing growl came from behind Creed, close to the ground, and the bounty hunter felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Quick as a bolt of energy from a ruptured plasma feed, Creed went for his guns.

'An' that's Ripper.'

Creed rotated on the spot, pulling both stubbers from his gun-belt, as the dog jumped. At the same moment the scavvy turned, with one sharp jerk of his arm lashing the cruelly spiked tip his barbed whip towards the bounty hunter. In turning his attention to the apparently more

immediate threat Creed had opened himself up to attack from the whip-wielding scavvy!

The over-large jaws of one of the mutant hound's heads latched onto the gunman's raised stubber as the end of the whip knotted itself around his other wrist, cruel barbs digging into his skin. The dog's second head snapped at Creed, tearing open the sleeve of his coat and grazing the flesh beneath. The brutish scavvy gave the whip a tug and the spiked cord tightened around Creed's wrist, ripping open blood vessels and making him drop the gun he held in his left hand.

All this took only seconds and in the time it takes to draw breath, the bounty hunter recovered himself. Pushing the muzzle of his stub gun even further down the dog's throat he fired off a round. The animal's head exploded in a red spray of canine blood, brains and bone, just as the second head latched onto his arm with its fangs, its reeking breath making him gag momentarily. Its teeth sank into his arm, grating against the bone, making his fingers spring open and he dropped the stubber in his right hand. Wincing against the pain, Creed swung his arm round, smashing the dog's remaining head against the alley wall. The already dying creature released its grip and fell to the ground.

'Ripper!' the scavvy cried out in anguish.

Grabbing the whip with both hands, the needle points cutting through his glove, the bounty hunter gave the cord a sharp tug. Creed's wiry frame belied his brute strength. Ezra Kaynn found himself stumbling forward and the whip slipped from his grasp. Not bothering to free his wrist of the wound cord, the bounty hunter covered the ground between him and the scavvy while his opponent was still trying to recover his footing. Before the scavvy could defend himself Creed was behind him. Holding the other end of the lash in his right hand he looped the barbed and knotted cord around Ezra Kaynn's head and pulled it tight.

The scavvy gave a strangled gasp as the barbs dug into his neck and the whip constricted his windpipe. Ezra's eyes bulged and his face turned purple, desperate fingers scrabbling at the constricting cord. With a gurgling groan the brutish degenerate gave up the fight. Creed felt the scavvy become a dead weight within the

noose of the improvised garrotte and let the body fall face down in the dirt. Before recovering his guns, the bounty hunter set about removing the whip from his torn wrist.

A whooping yell, shrill as the scream of a face-eater, almost made him jump out of his skin and caused him to look round. Out of the corner of his eye he had the impression of the brickwork coming alive behind him as something detached itself from the wall of the alleyway.

But there was no one else here! Creed thought in a moment of shocked surprise.

Hands grabbed him around the neck as someone leapt onto his back. Hard heels kicked him viciously and repeatedly in the kidneys as bony fingers squeezed his windpipe closed. Now it was Creed's turn to gasp for air.

Creed threw himself backwards, trying to crush whoever was on his back against the wall behind him. He heard a gasp, as if his assailant had been winded, but this was then followed by a cackling laugh. The feet kicked again and the fingers dug even deeper into his throat. As grey shapes began to swim in front of his eyes Creed grabbed the thin arms of the scavvy on his back. Before he blacked out he bent double, at the same time pulling on the man's arms, using the momentum to help him throw his assailant over his head.

A small, wiry creature, naked except for a spider-hide loincloth and a necklace of finger bones, and with a shock of spiked hair landed in the dust on the ground in front of him. It seemed to Creed that the man's skin was mottled the same colour as the wall. Putting the thought from his mind he pulled his boot knife from its scabbard next to his leg and plunged it into the little man's chest. The chameleonic scavvy let out a baleful wail and reached for the blade sticking out of its sternum. With one twist of the knife Creed silenced the man's cries.

At once the mottling on the scavvy's skin began to fade, returning to a more 'natural' colour. Creed had heard rumours of wyrds having such powers, their psychic powers allowing them to camouflage themselves against any background they might choose. Whether it worked by the ward's skin actually changing colour and texture or whether the psyker simply clouded the

minds of those around him to hide his presence, fooling their brains into thinking there was nothing there, mattered not. Loko 'Raving Insane' Kaynn was now dead too.

Five down, two to go, Creed thought to himself.



ROCKING ON THE back legs of the chair, with his booted feet resting on the table in front of him, Creed picked up the last piece of gun mechanism from the oil cloth spread out on the table top and eased it back into place. Holding the gleaming stub gun in one hand, marvelling at its blue-grey shine, with the other he spun the bullet chamber. 'Looking good,' he drawled.

'You done for now, bounty-man!' Django Kaynn shouted at him. He had chewed through his gag and Creed saw no point in replacing it now. Chances were the starving cannibal would want to bite off a few of his fingers if he even tried. He was still cuffed after all.

'That so?' the bounty hunter said, taking a drag on the stub of his cheroot.

'Big brother'll come for yous. Then yousa gonna be sorry! Gator's meaner than a sackful of starvin'ripperjacks.'

Creed laid the gun carefully on the table and flexed his right hand. Under the tear in his coat sleeve a bloodstained bandage was wound tightly round the dog bite. *Gonna have to get myself a jab from old Doc Haze for that,* he thought, making a mental note. *He still owes me for that Fester Hole job.*

'An' 'e never goes anywhere without 'is Scaly-friend Nuwt. Nuwt don't say much but 'e could crush every bone in yer body, an' 'e will!'

'I'm ready for them,' the bounty hunter said, adjusting the 'tourniquet wrapped around his left wrist, and nodded back over his shoulder.

In front of the lock-up a barricade of oil-drums, an over-turned cart and other detritus formed a stockade almost right around the jailhouse. Unslinging an ammo belt Creed began to load his cleaned and oiled stub guns.

THE NITRATE GLOOM of dome-dusk had given way to the petroleum black of hive-night. In the distance, beyond the town, areas of the Sumpscum Marshes were illuminated by the uranium glow of the contaminant fields.

In a cascade of a dozen tiny incandescent explosions, a hail of bullets streaked out of the darkness and into the barricade. Crates splintered and pieces of debris were thrown into the air around the lock-up. A last shell impacted against the wall next to the open door in a cloud of plaster dust.

Whoever he is he's well-armed, Creed noted without any pleasure.

'Theys here! Theys here!' the imprisoned scavvy yelled excitedly.

'Bounty-man? I got yer attention?' the guttural shout came out of the night.

Cautiously Creed peered over the parapet of his barricade. In the intermittent flicker of a sparking electric lamp on the opposite side of the square he could make out two figures half in cover behind a jumble of plastic cargo crates. One was tall and, his outline suggested, heavily-muscled. The other was a giant outhouse of a shadow, almost as broad across its shoulders as its hunched form was tall. It was the first who had spoken.

'My name's Gator Kaynn and this here's my associate,' the tall figure gestured to the mass next to him. 'Say hello, Nuwt.' The mutant let out a deep, rumbling growl.

Stub guns roaring, Creed bombarded the two scavvy gangers with his own bullet-storm. Gator Kaynn returned fire. In the near-darkness Creed saw the scaly heft something into the air. He ducked a split second before the heavy, serrated metal disc hummed over his head and cut through the doorframe behind him. Both barrels blazing, the bounty hunter resumed the firefight.

Over the recoil roar of the two sides' guns Creed could hear Django screaming support for his 'brothers'. Gunshots threw up dust from the rocky ground and pieces of both barricades disintegrated in the crossfire. It didn't take long before both of them had emptied every chamber. A hush fell over the town square as the scavvy and the bounty hunter hurriedly reloaded.

'You still there, bounty-man, or have you run back to your scummer hovel?' Gator shouted, trying to goad his quarry into unthinking action.

'I'm still here,' the bounty hunter railed, 'but I'm surprised you are, swamp boy. You realise this is the end of the Kaynn Clan? And the name's Creed.'

'Big words from a big mouth, scuzzhead!' the scavvy shouted back. 'You got the guts to back 'em up?'

The longer Creed kept the idiot scavvy talking the more time he had to reload both stubbers. The chambers of one fully replenished, he slipped the first bullet of a dozen into the second empty weapon. 'Your stinking sewer-filth bloodline stops here! I took down all your maniac brothers. What makes you think I can't bring you down too?'

'Him,' Gator said as Creed heard the reptile growl and the grating of scales on stone behind him.

The bounty hunter turned as the great, white sumpgator lashed its thick tail at him. It hit his right arm with a sickening crack and Creed felt lances of white hot agony shoot through his arm. The shock caused his legs to give way beneath him. Gritting his teeth against the excruciating pain Creed clutched at his broken limb, precious ammunition tumbling to the ground, while the loaded stubber fell from his hand.

'Helmawr's rump!' Creed cursed. The freaking lizard must've slipped in round the back! The cacophony of the shoot out had drowned out any sound made by the sumpgator as it had breached the barricade and waddled up to Creed from behind.

'Attaboy, croc!' Django shouted, his face pressed against the window grille. 'Rip 'is arms off!'

The albino reptile fixed the bounty hunter with a cold, yellow stare. Its crocodile jaws slowly opened and the monster growled again. Dragging its three-metre long bulk forward on splayed stumpy legs the sumpgator prepared to finish what it had already started.

With one gun practically empty and the other, for the moment, unreachable Creed had to think fast. He wasn't sure a dum-

dum round could penetrate the adamantium hard skull of a sumpgator, even at this close range. His predicament helping him suppress the screaming pain of his broken arm, Creed fumbled inside his coat with his left hand. After a frantic search he pulled out a fist-sized metal object. Flicking the pin from the grenade Creed armed the firing mechanism. Waiting until he could feel its moist foetid breath on his face, Creed tossed the grenade into the creature's mouth. The sumpgator gulped and swallowed the frag grenade.

Its scavvy master bounded over the unmanned barricade in time to see the sumpgator's stomach erupt in an explosive blast of blood and gristle, that tore the monster apart. Gator Kaynn landed almost on top of the bounty hunter, hatred burning in his maddened stare. Slamming the open breach of the stub gun still gripped in his left hand shut against his knee, Creed brought the trusted firearm, with its single, precious round to bear against the scavvy's head, and fired. The report of the weapon was deadened by the mass of grey tissue that now burst from the shattered skull. Gator Kaynn's corpse joined that of his pet on the ground before the disbelieving Django's horrified gaze.

Still one scavver standing, Creed thought as he staggered to his feet, his right arm hanging uselessly at his side.

The barricade exploded in a maelstrom of splintering wood and flying oil-drums as the massive bulk of the scaly burst through it. Creed turned the stub gun on the hulking mutant. Automatically, without thinking, he pulled the trigger. Its single cartridge spent, the only sound that came from the gun was the hollow click of an empty chamber. No more bullets and no time to reload.

Bellowing, the scaly charged. Pounding towards the bounty hunter at speed, the outcome seemed inevitable. But at the last possible moment Creed dodged. Twisting out of his path, Creed struck out with a leg, tripping the reptilian mutant as it hurtled past. Unable to halt the momentum of its stumbling charge, the scaly smashed into the lock-up, crashing through the wall in an avalanche of bricks and steel.

It was too much for the crumbling structure of the building, mortar and bolts corroded by years of exposure to the chemical mists that rolled in off the polluted marshlands. With a crash of collapsing masonry and the groan of buckling girders the jailhouse collapsed on top of the scaly. With a dull crunch, a steel roof beam came down on the scaly's skull. Nuwt remained motionless among the rubble of the demolished lock-up.

Nathan Creed surveyed the devastation around him, the ruins of the barricade, the bodies of his foes, the pile of rubble that had been the settlement's lock-up. Wiping reptilian digestive juices and gristle from his face he was suddenly reminded of the agony of his broken arm.

Now, where are you, old girl? he wondered as he began overturning and upending pieces of debris in search of his missing, and loaded, stub gun.

In a shower of plaster dust the ugly head of Django Kaynn emerged from the rubble ruin of the lock-up. Somehow he had survived the destruction of the building where the scaly had not. His hands still secured behind his back he staggered out from among the wreckage and started to run.

Jailbreak! thought Creed. After everything that's happened. The murdering slimeball's determined, I'll give him that, but this ends now!

He needed a gun and his were useless: one empty, the other buried beneath the wreckage. The dead Gator still clutched a looted autopistol in one hand. Prising it free of the scavvy's stiffened grip, Creed raised the weapon with his good hand. Gator had been kind enough to fit it with a fresh clip before he died. Sighting along the barrel he took aim at the fleeing prisoner. Two shots rung out across the town square. With a yelping cry Django dropped to the ground in the dust and dirt, both knees shot out.

The bounty hunter walked up to the whimpering, crippled scavvy. Hearing the tread of his footsteps Django opened watery eyes to see what Creed was going to do to him next. 'I thought you wanted me alive,' he sobbed.

Creed pulled the scavvy's head up sharply by his hair and held a grubby piece of parchment in front of his face. On it were crude pen and ink sketches of the members of the Kaynn Clan Gang. It was obvious that the artist's impressions had been drawn by someone who had been told what the mutant mob looked like but who had never seen them in the flesh. Gothic script accompanied the pictures but this meant nothing to the illiterate cannibal.

'Can you see what that says,' the bounty hunter asked in his husky drawl, 'or shall I read it for you?' 'The Kaynn Clan Gang, wanted dead!'

Slowly it began to dawn on Django what Creed's plan had been all along. He swallowed hard as his own fate became clear.

'Who'd be mad enough to want a murdering bunch of cannibals brought in alive?' Creed said, the butt of a cheroot still clenched between his teeth.

'Then why dincha come into the Sumpscum after us, ya yellow-bellied bastard?'

'What, enter that sludge jelly-infested death-trap when I could get the whole, brainless family to come to me?' The bounty hunter's face was an inscrutable mask as he pressed the muzzle of the autopistol against the scavvy's head.

'You're dead, bounty-man! Mama's gonna be mighty mad when she hears 'bout this. And she will. She'll hunt you down like a scavvy hound! She will! She'll come for you!' Django spat, pain and fear becoming defiant fury.

Wincing, Creed withdrew a second bounty poster from the depths of his coat and shook it open in front of the scavvy's face. Django Kaynn stared at it, eyes wide open in shocked surprise. The image of a hideous, hairy, toothless crone scowled back at him.

The bounty hunter smiled coldly: 'I'm counting on it.' ★





Son and Heir

BY IAN WINTERTON

‘BY THE GRACE of the Lady!’ The Grail Knight’s voice echoed throughout the forest clearing. The heads of the four beastmen at the entrance to the shrine turned to look at him, claws reaching for weapons. Drawing his own blade, Sir Gilles Ettringer, Knight of the Grail and champion of Baron Gregory de Chambourt, spurred his steed towards the hated abominations.

How dare they tread upon this holy place?

Though righteous anger burned in his heart, he did not let it consume nor cloud his mind, for he was a loyal servant of the Lady of the Lake. Nourished by the water of the holy chalice, his soul was as strong and sure as the steel in his mailed hand. These defilers would pay dearly for their trespass.

The first was dispatched before he even had chance to bring his sword to bear. The second’s head, that of a half-starved dog, flew from his shoulders, crashing into the undergrowth.

A goat-headed enemy came at him from the side, baring foam-flecked teeth, scrawny arm preparing to throw a crude spear. Sir Gilles tugged sharply at the reins, sinking his spurs deep into his mount, manoeuvred it round. The warhorse, rocking forward onto sturdy forelegs, kicked sharply backwards, its iron-clad hooves snapping the beastman’s neck.

A spiked mace was swung vainly. Sir Gilles brought his shield up, absorbing the blow, then flicked his blade deftly out, its point sinking for a fatal second into the breast of his final foe.

Hardly out of breath, Sir Gilles surveyed the carnage he had wrought. The only sound was the pounding of his horse’s hooves as it pawed the blood-soaked ground.

Darkness came prematurely to this part of the forest, the sun blocked out by the plateau that was Sir Gilles’s home. Though the base of the Chambourt was only an

hour’s ride distant, to be alone in the forest at this time was far from desirable, even for a warrior of his stature.

Before he could resume his journey, there was something he had to be sure of.

Armour clanking, Sir Gilles dismounted. He raised the visor on his helm, revealing the face of a middle-aged man, lined and white-whiskered. He walked towards the entrance of the shrine and knew immediately that his task was not yet over.

From inside he could hear the buzzing of flies.



‘LYING AT THE heart of Bretonnia, the Chambourt was a vast shelf nestling in the foothills of the Orcal Massif, thrusting high above the crag-filled oaks of the Forest of Charons.

From the window of his chamber, the baron gazed out at his realm with a contented heart. Set against the monotonous, cloud-wisped expanse of the forest, the Chambourt glowed beneath the last rays of the setting sun. Squares of corn caught the fading sunlight, intersected with pasture, dotted with healthy cattle. Irrigated orchards flanked the river that flowed down from the snow-capped peaks of the Massif, cutting a life-giving path through the land.

There was a light knock at the door.

‘Enter,’ the baron said, turning from the window.

Pagnol, his ageing manservant, shuffled into the room, gaze respectfully averted. The baron shuttered the window.

‘The banquet hall is prepared, my liege,’ said the old man. ‘We wait only for your presence.’

‘Any word from Sir Gilles?’

‘No, my lord. He has not yet returned.’

Taking a robe from his bed, the baron fastened it at his shoulder and stepped towards the doorway, held open by the faithful Pagnol. 'No matter. It is not to be helped.'

At twenty-five the baron was entering the fifth year of his rule. A robust warrior, he was much loved by the people, like his father before him. The year also saw a record harvest, the best the old farmers said, since they were but boys. The barrels were full of new wine, and along the river the mills ground a ceaseless supply of wheat into flour. Baskets seemingly overflowing with fruit could be seen stacked on every doorstep or rattling to market on the back of wagons.

The baron was overjoyed with his realm. Everything seemed vital and alive, imbued with an astonishing fertility. This, it transpired, included his young wife, the Lady Isobella. A pleasingly attractive princess of the Estalian nobility, she was about to give birth to their first child.

Her labour pains had started that morning. Ensnconcing her in a specially constructed birthing chamber, the midwives attended to her while the priests prayed to the Lady of the Lake for the baby to be born healthy, untainted and, most importantly, male. The baron, as was the tradition, was to spend the time in the banqueting hall. It was a shame that his old friend, Sir Gilles, would not be present. Still, with a wench on each arm and a never-ending supply of wine, the baron felt sure the birth would be over in no time.



ELSEWHERE. ELSEWHERE, the seeds of the baron's undoing were not only sown, but had taken root.

The baron had a sister, ten years his junior. Named Juliette, she was of the same healthy stock as he, though born of a different mother. It was universally agreed by approving men and envious women that she was possessed of great beauty. Always immaculately attired in gowns of flowing silk, she was elegant, demure and slim of waist. Her pale face was delicately featured, painted at the lips and eyes like the finest of masques. With her modest and chaste nature, she was the model of obedient

womanhood, sought after by every unmarried nobleman in Bretonnia and beyond.

The baron forbade her to attend banquets, for fear that the sight of such debauchery and routine debasement would corrupt her valuable innocence. Some would say later that this was not a little ironic. Counting Juliette amongst his many blessings, the baron looked forward to the day of her marriage and the vast dowry she would no doubt bring.

He could not have known then that his sister was already wed.



ABOVE THE DRONE of the flies there was a chanting. Clipped, harsh syllables, of no language Sir Gilles understood, but they possessed a rhythm he recognised, a dread cadence that pierced him to his heart with its evil intent.

The entrance gave way to a wide corridor that led in turn to the main chapel. Within, the knight could see insubstantial shadows, cast by candlelight, slowly writhing. A stench assailed his nostrils, the scent of damp and decay and abandonment. For how long had these fiends been desecrating this holy place? So close to the Chambourt itself, it was not often used by travellers and pilgrims. He himself, amongst the most pious, had not ventured this way in over a year. However long it had been, it would end today.

Shield up, sword at the ready, Sir Gilles stepped into the chapel.

Dead animals. Rats, goats, dogs, sheep, all in varying stages of decomposition, piled high around the room. Dead priests, male and female, lay among them, some not long dead, others grey and rotting. The abominable centre-piece of the sculpture was the lone priestess of the chapel. A thin, middle-aged woman, her body hung by the neck from a rope fastened to one of the roof-beams. Stripped of her robes, the skin had been flayed from her bones, stopping only at the ligature that bit tightly into the skin beneath her chin. A gaping expression of pure terror was stamped on her ashen face. From the glistening blood on her muscle tissue, Sir Gilles guessed that she had been the last to die.

Standing beside her, stroking the priestess's cheek in a mockery of affection, was a man.

A solid block of muscle, he was naked, blasphemous symbols daubed in blood on his body. Long, jet-black hair flowed over his taut shoulders. Eyes lightly closed, he continued to murmur foul homage to his Dark Gods. A blood-soaked, cruelly curved dagger lay at his feet.

With a cry, Sir Gilles launched himself at the fiend.

Eyes snapping open, the man moved with unnatural speed. Sir Gilles found his blade biting into the marble floor. Recovering his balance, he turned to face his foe.

The man, if man he truly was, was standing a little way off, close to the rotting carcasses, rocking from side to side on the balls of his feet like a wrestler preparing to fight. He made no attempt to reach for the dagger. His dark eyes flashed with venom. An amused smile played on his lips.

Cautiously, Sir Gilles squared up to the man. He was naked, unarmed and yet seemed more sure of himself than any opponent he had ever faced. Was it madness that produced such self-belief, or something else?

Sir Gilles brought his sword back, then struck, this time anticipating the man's agile dodge. The blade hit the man on the side just above his top rib, cutting him open.

Clutching his wound, blood bubbling up between his fingers, the man staggered, knocked against the priestess, setting her gently swinging, and fell on his side. As blood pumped out of him, he started laughing gently, as though the blow had but tickled him.

Kicking the dagger safely out of reach, Sir Gilles moved in to settle the matter. Something leapt at him from behind. From the shrill screams, he could tell that his assailant was a woman. She was unarmed, also, and wearing only a thin cotton robe. She clung with one hand to Sir Gilles's back, while trying to claw at his face with the other. He shifted his weight and effortlessly threw her over him. She smacked against the hard floor, a bone in her leg snapping.

She lay groaning, twisting in anguish on the floor. Nearby, her companion was still shaking with mirth. His wound, Sir Gilles noted with concern, no longer bled and was

healing up. This man was well protected by his foul gods. The fire would be the only sure way of ending his evil.

Working quickly, afraid that his quarry would soon recover, Sir Gilles set about tying him up, so as to deliver him to the baron. Considering her of little threat, he did not pay the woman much attention. She continued to squirm in pain, moaning softly.

'Make it stop, make it stop...'

The voice. The voice seemed familiar. Pulling the last of the knots tight, Sir Gilles stood up and crossed the chamber. He knelt by the woman, brushed the hair from her face and lifted her head up.

The old knight caught his breath, whispered a prayer on the holy chalice.

Staring at him with hatred and a snarl on her fair lips, was the Lady Juliette.



LEAVING HIS TWO prisoners with the castle's militia, Sir Gilles strode into the banqueting hall. A grave expression on his face, his tabard flecked with the blood of beastmen, revellers heads turned to stare at him as he walked the length of the table. By the time he had reached the baron all merry-making and conversation had ceased.

'If I may speak with you, my lord.'



FULL OF WINE, the baron refused to believe the knight at first. 'My sister sleeps in her room,' he guffawed. 'As she has done every night.'

Sir Gilles laid a hand on his master's shoulder.

'Not every night, I fear,' he said.

The baron understood the situation soon enough when he was shown to the cell holding his sister. She was huddled in the corner of the room, broken leg lying at an unnatural angle, hateful eyes shining from the gloom. When the baron approached, she hissed and spat like a cat.

'Show me the fiend responsible for this outrage,' the baron said, his voice shaking with anger. 'And I will have his head.'

THE DARK-HAIRED man was altogether calmer than his bride. Clothed now in sack-cloth, he sat against the wall of his cell, a serene smile on his lips. Flanked by crossbow-wielding guards, the baron confronted him.

'What manner of daemon are you?'

'None, sir.' The man spoke in a deep, steady voice. 'I am a man like yourself.'

'That I doubt. From where do you hail, witch?'

The man gave a vague wave of his hand.

A headache banging behind his eyeballs from the wine, the baron massaged his temples with one hand. 'Do you, then, have a name?'

The man gave no answer.

The baron was not one to pander to such games. 'No matter,' he said, coldly. 'My torturers will have it from you before long. And after that, you will burn.'



THE WITCH-FINDERS set about their task with consummate zeal and efficiency. When the stranger was next brought before the baron, his body was broken, if not his spirit. His long hair had been shaved down to the scalp with a blunt knife. Dried blood congealed over his face and ears. He was missing his top row of teeth. His back flapped open, raw from flogging. But, like the wound in his side, of which no sign remained, the man's body appeared to be healing rapidly. Of small consolation to the baron were the two fingers that the shears had taken. Although hours had passed, they remained stubborn stumps. So he *could* be hurt. He *would* be hurt.

The baron, gazing levelly from his throne at the wretched sight before him, ordered the two guards holding the man by his arms to relinquish their grip. The witch did not topple forward as expected, but stood, swaying, his eyes regarding his tormentor defiantly. He spoke mockingly in a clear voice.

'Sir, I feel I must thank you. The pain your lackeys have inflicted upon me is but a small price to pay for the months of nocturnal pleasure your sister has bestowed upon me.'

The baron leapt from his seat, half jumped down the steps and struck the witch across his face, hard with his gauntleted hand. The man staggered back, laughing, fresh blood pouring from a cut over his eye.

'I would kill you here with my bare hands,' bellowed the baron, 'if the law did not demand that you, like all your diseased kind, should be put to the fire.'

'Oh, sir, sir...' the witch cooed. 'Rest assured I will not burn. My master's game will not allow it. I am to be the bane of your life. You do not even begin to comprehend the horror of which I am capable.'

The baron found himself unable to look for long upon the man's face, lest he catch sight of himself in eyes as jet-black and soulless as a viper's.

The witch cupped his hand to his ear as though listening for something. A childish grin spread across his face. 'Oh, sir. I believe congratulations are in order. You are a father at last. And it is a boy.'

In the wake of the terrible events, the baron had forgotten about his wife's confinement. Before he could react, a boy, son to one of the mid-wives, came scampering into the throne-room. He gave a hurried, unpractised bow and said, excitably, 'My lord, my mother bids me come tell you the glad tidings, that my lady has been delivered of a son.'

Ordering the guards to clamp themselves back onto the prisoner, the baron strode towards the door. Struggling against his captors, the witch started to laugh once again.

'Baron! Hear me!' he screamed. 'By the Dark Gods I lay a curse upon your house! I will take everything from you, in time. First, though: your wife!'

The baron started to run.

'Go!' the witch shouted after him. 'But you are too late. My master's work is already done.'



THE MIDWIVES and servant-girls crowded round the newborn, cooing in adoration. None of them thought to check on the baroness.

The baron burst into the chamber.

Responding to his presence by casting their eyes to the floor, the women curtsied and murmured respectfully.

Rushing to his wife's side, the baron took her hand in his. Her head turned slowly to face him. Though drawn and tired from her ordeal, she wore a contented smile.

It was then that he noticed the blood at the corner of her mouth. It trickled out, a small amount at first, but grew steadily. The baroness appeared not to notice, but continued to stare beatifically at her husband.

'Help her,' he said, unable to raise his voice above a hiss. The servant-girls looked up. 'Help her.'

Her head fell onto one side, a dead weight. Blood seeped slowly out, soaking into the pillow and onto the sheet. Her body went limp. But for the soft whimpering from the servant-girls, there was no noise.

The baron freed his hand from his wife's lifeless fingers. Numb and shaking, he crossed the room and picked up the child. He held it to his breast. A boy, thanks be to the Lady. A son. An heir.



THE BARON went immediately from the chamber, channelling his grief into thunderous anger. In the cell, he rained blow after blow against the witch's body. Throughout it all, the fiend made no sound.

At last, breathing hard, exhausted, his knuckles scuffed and bleeding, the baron stopped.

The witch sat up, as though refreshed, one eye completely closed with bruising.

'You have a healthy son, my lord,' he said. 'Such a shame that his life will be so short.'

Powered by grief and fear, the baron launched himself again at the witch, pinning him to the wall by the throat.

'You will speak no more!'

From his belt he took a dagger and, forcing the witch's jaws apart, worked his way inside the mouth, cut and carved for a second, then stepped back.

The witch slumped against the wall, blood cascading from his mouth. His face was slack but his eyes still shone with mirth and malice.

WHILE THESE EVENTS had been unfolding, a crowd of the kingdom's finest scholars had been gathered about the Lady Juliette. By now almost mad with grief, the baron received their report in a state of great agitation.

'How fares my sister?'

All reluctant to speak, Blampel the beak-nosed physician was nudged forward. One hand adjusting his skull-cap, he muttered a curse intended for his craven colleagues.

'I fear the news is not good, my Lord,' he said at last.

The baron nodded at him to elaborate.

'The lady has lost her mind. Human speech and reasoning are beyond her. Never before have I seen madness consume a person so swiftly.'

Stroking his neatly-trimmed beard with a hand still spattered with the witch's dried blood, the baron said, 'And what of her dabbling in witchcraft? Is she an innocent party or am I to put my own flesh and blood to the flame?' He looked across. 'Tertullion?'

The portly mage, who had been hiding at the back of the group, guzzling from a wineskin left over from the banquet, shuffled drunkenly forward. He dabbed at his food-encrusted whiskers and steadied himself against a pillar. 'My lord. As my friend, the learned man of medicine, has already rightly diagnosed, the Lady Juliette is quite insane. I am of the opinion that because of this, her innocence or otherwise in this matter is now an irrelevance. Any of the Dark Ways that may have been imparted to her by her foul consort are now surely lost, along with the rest of her humanity.'

This was typical of Tertullion. Long-winded, wordy. And wrong.



FOR COME THE dawn, the guards found within the cell, not the witch but the Lady Juliette, her state of mind greatly improved. Somehow fully clothed, she stood holding the trail of her silken dress up, so as to avoid the filth of the floor. Giggling like a young girl, she uttered a single dark word.

Two of the guards fell, screaming, to their knees, eyeballs liquefying, bubbling from the sockets. The third guard, swinging blindly with terror, lopped her head neatly from her body. Escaping from her neck with a hiss like steam, blood sprayed the dirty walls and showered the straw-strewn floor.

Blinking blood out of his eyes, the petrified guard stared at the crumpled body before him as it twitched its last. Juliette's head lay at an angle, partly obscured by the straw, her fine, dark hair framing an expression of surprise.

The witch, her master, was not to be seen for many years.



THOUGH HE WAS born into a house of sorrow, the baron's son, also named Gregory as had been the custom for the first-born son for ten generations, grew into a healthy and well-adjusted boy. His father put at his disposal the finest academics. He soon became the first male member of the line who could read and write, and in several languages, too. But it soon became apparent that the warrior-blood burned brightly within. As adolescence approached, it was to jousts and sword-play that he turned. Even the books he read were tomes dealing with tactics and warfare.

Eager to encourage this aspect of his son's life, the baron put him under the tutelage of Sir Gilles. Though already into his fourth decade at the boy's birth, his sword skills knew no equal and, in the trials, he could still keep several far younger opponents at bay. But it was his tales that made Gregory love him.

Gilles's questing had taken him all over the Old World and beyond. He had fought alongside dwarfs against orcs and goblins in the World's Edge Mountains, done battle with Sartosan pirates, slaughtered beastmen and mutants within the forests, even driven a skaven horde back into the heart of its foul subterranean nest. Every time Gilles spoke of these adventures, Gregory's face lit up in rapt attention.

Shortly before his twelfth birthday, he asked Gilles why he was not allowed to leave the castle.

'That is your father's decision,' Gilles said in his soothing, deep voice. 'And you would do better not to question it.'

But something in the Grail Knight's pale, blue eyes, told the young heir to do exactly the opposite.



YOU HAVE BEEN filling his head with your tales!' the baron roared. Gilles, kneeling before the throne on the flagstones, lifted his bowed head.

'I meant no harm by it, my liege.'

The baron, about to shout again, felt suddenly foolish. He put one hand against the side of his head, where the hair had already grown prematurely grey.

'Get up, old friend,' the baron said, sadly. 'I am sorry.'

Gilles got to his feet and looked his master steadily in the eyes. 'No apologies are necessary,' he said. 'But I must ask you why you are so opposed to your son's request?'

'Because I will not allow him to leave this castle,' said the baron. 'And this hunting party he craves? Into the forest? No.' He sighed wearily, adding, 'It is for his own protection.'

'That is as maybe,' Gilles said. 'But do you not think it more dangerous to cosset the boy, to leave him ill-prepared for the dangers he may face?'

'I have made my decision,' the baron rumbled.



THE HUNTING PARTY took place a week later, on the occasion of Gregory's birthday. Though he had relented, the baron was leaving nothing to chance. A retinue of men-at-arms and bowmen, as well as Gilles and his company of knights and squires, all accompanied the noblemen down into the forest. Also, for his magical abilities only, the old bore Tertullion was carried on a litter with the party, his white, oval face flushed with the wine he drank.

They rode away from the shadow of the Chambourt, to an area where direct sunlight broke through the canopy of leaves. Riding between Gilles and his father, Gregory jabbered with excitement.

'Will we hunt boar, father?'

'Yes,' the baron said. 'With the lance.'

The boy turned to Gilles. 'And deer? I would like to test my archery skills on a moving target. Will we hunt deer?'

'Undoubtedly,' Sir Gilles said with a laugh. He flashed a smile across at the baron, and was pleased to see that he shared his good humour.

Tertullion, his goblet refreshed by a servant-girl, bobbed alongside on his cushion.

'I must say, my lord,' he slurred, 'that the effect of this hunting party upon the young prince, already a fine figure of burgeoning manhood, can only be beneficial.' He raised his drink. 'A capital idea.'

It was to be the last wrong thing he said. The arrow entered through his eyeball, cracked his skull apart, and left through the back of his head.

He was but the first.

'Beastmen!' cried one of the soldiers from the front. Horses whinnied as a volley of arrows came from the trees. Screams. The thud of arrowheads on shields.

Pulling the reins of his steed in tight, Sir Gilles quickly assessed the situation. Arrows were coming from all around. They were surrounded. He spurred his horse through the confusion of panicked noblemen, to the men-at-arms.

'Form up! Form up!' he yelled. 'Shields high!'

At his word the bowmen scurried forward, taking up places behind the pikes. They fired a volley into the trees. Bestial cries of their victims rang out. Pulling his visor down, Gilles peered into the murk. The shadows moved; suggestions of horns and hooves, tentacles and twisted, Chaos-tainted limbs. This was no opportunist beastman raid, he realised. They were well organised. And there were hundreds of them.

Screaming in their foul, ululating tongue, the enemy burst forth from the trees. Wave after wave fell to the bow and the pike, but each time a gap was left. Under Gilles's command, the soldiers shored up, but the protective circle was getting ever smaller.

And the arrows kept coming from all around.

Gilles looked across at Gregory. To the boy's credit he showed no fear. His face, as he kept close to his father, was fixed with a look of stoic determination. He was calm. He had his wits. He would make a fine warrior.

A clamour of clashing armour from one side of the circle announced another attack. The beastmen were concentrating on one area. They hacked at it, burst through, splintering shields and cleaving skulls, cutting down bowmen. They were in.

His horse rising onto its hind-legs, Gilles raised his sword skywards, gave a rallying cry and went to join the fray. An arrow found a gap in his mount's armour-plating, piercing its side. It fell sideways. Unable to free his foot from his stirrups in time, Gilles went with it.

He heard the crunch as his leg dislocated. His sword snapped in two as it connected with a rock. Fighting against the pain, Gilles was unaware of the beastman, a stocky hunchback with the head of bull, standing over him with a club. Raining blow after blow against his armour, it beat him into the blackness.



GILLES AWOKE TO find himself bound. He had been stripped of his armour and was lying on a slab of stone, his arms and legs pinioned by ropes. He was covered in bruises. Blood had dried over his head. His broken leg was numb and would not move. From a torch set on the wall, he could see that he was in some sort of cave. The vicious points of stalactites jutted out of the darkness above him.

'Sir Gilles?' a voice called. It was hoarse as though from sobbing.

'Gregory?'

Gilles craned his head, wincing against the pain. The lad, tied to another slab of rock, appeared unharmed. He was trembling, his face once again that of a frightened boy.

A man entered the room. Towering, his head almost touching the jagged roof, Sir Gilles recognised him of old. He had grown his long hair back. The witch.

He lowered his disfigured face, his hair brushing against Sir Gilles's face. He hissed, opening his tongueless mouth, a string of saliva winding its way down onto the knight's forehead. Sir Gilles gazed defiantly upon the Witch, unflinching.

The witch stood up, a rattling, gurgling laugh coming from his throat. He clicked his fingers. Two beastmen lumbered in, hooves clattering on the rock, and took Gregory up from his slab. He started to cry, kicking uselessly against them as they took him from the cave.

'Where are you taking him?' Gilles cried out. 'I warn you now, witch! Do not harm that boy!'

The witch stood in the centre of the room, facing Sir Gilles. He pulled out a knife. Wide-bladed and so sharp its edges shone, it was inscribed with the eldritch signs of the witch's evil master. He held it above his head in both hands, stumps knotting with the fingers that remained, blade facing the floor. He brought it down, plunging it into an imaginary victim. His body shook with deranged, guttural laughter.

The witch strode from the room, dagger at the ready.

Desperately, Sir Gilles began to struggle against his bonds.



IN THE FOREST, the cries of the wounded and dying filled the twilight. Soldiers busied themselves digging graves for the dead men. A pyre was stacked high with slaughtered horses, the stench of burning meat all pervading. Subdued and utterly defeated, the men performed their grim duties like automatons. None of them spoke of the likely fates of those men whose bodies could not be found.

Amidst this pitiful scene, surrounded by a circle of troops, the baron sat on a rock, staring into space, his grief by now impenetrable.

'The head-count has been completed, my lord,' the sergeant-at-arms said quietly.

Barely registering the man's presence, the baron waved a cursory hand at him to continue.

'Upon the field are the bodies of thirty men, five of them of name. Ten more are severely wounded and are not expected to live long.'

The baron shuddered, closing his eyes slowly. It was all his fault.

'There is one more disturbing detail,' the sergeant went on. 'As well as your son and Sir Gilles, we could not find the bodies of a further ten retainers. From the testimony of the men, confused by the chaos of battle though it is, they appear to have been taken away alive.'

'But why?' the baron demanded, as much of the darkening forest as the sergeant.

A horse came galloping from the forest, carrying on its back one of the baron's scouts. The man pulled his mount to a halt and dismounted. He stood, panting, trying to find his voice, sweat dripping from his head.

'My lord,' he said, breathlessly. 'My lord, I think I have found them!'



SITTING UP ON the slab, Sir Gilles untied the last of the bonds around his feet. He swung round and planted his good foot on the cave floor. Wincing, he limped up the rough slope in the direction the witch had taken. Supporting himself on the limestone wall, he looked down into another chamber, beyond which could be seen a moonlit clearing in the forest. A bonfire was burning and the unholy mutterings of the beastmen could be heard. Somewhere, drums were being pounded.

Sir Gilles crept out of the cave, hoping that the night and the flickering shadows of the fire would provide enough cover to prevent his detection. It was then he heard the first scream.

Squinting in the darkness, Sir Gilles could make out a terrible sight.

With several flat-topped stones arranged around him in a circle, each with one of the baron's soldiers lying upon it, the witch stood in his robes, his knife in one hand, a severed head in the other. Blood trickled down his arm, glistening in the flames. He moved on to his next victim.

Issuing a silent prayer to the Lady, Sir Gilles called upon his last reserves of strength and courage and took action. He deftly broke the neck of the nearest beastman, took its weapon – a rusted broadsword – and went to work.

Swinging rhythmically, lopping off heads, opening throats, he hobbled forward, screaming out the ancient battle-cries of his order. The beastmen, drunk and distracted by the blood-letting ceremony, were slow to react. And Sir Gilles had his righteous anger on his side. Wounded though he was, he was unstoppable.

More screams rang out as the witch continued to add new heads to the pile at his feet.

Sir Gilles was by now on the other side of the bonfire and could see the witch and his unholy ritual clearly now. The prince was tied to a tree, slumped unconscious, arms above his head and feet crossed over like a martyr of old. The Witch was working on the last of the men. The knife, blunted on the other victims, hacked laboriously through wind-pipe and bone, sending blood rising through the darkness. Occupied with fending off beastmen, Gilles could only listen helplessly to the strangled cries of the man's prolonged agony.

Standing back, the last of the heads in his hands, the witch held both arms aloft, the power of his sacrifices flowing through him. He moved towards Gregory.

A beastman came out of the darkness at Sir Gilles, its large hooves kicking up cinders and dead twigs. One arm was a lashing tentacle, the other a thick, almost-human arm, wielding a large club. Its head was that of a horse. Deep-set eyes glowed with rage. Its mouth was crowded with needle-sharp teeth. Expertly side-stepping Sir Gilles' first lunge, it retaliated with an unexpectedly swift upswing that caught the knight in the stomach. Winded, he staggered backwards. The beastman leapt at him.

Beyond the horse-creature, Sir Gilles could see that the witch had not yet harmed Gregory. He stood instead by the tree, freeing Gregory from his bonds, no doubt in preparation for moving him to one of the plinths.

Blocking club with sword, Sir Gilles pulled his arm back ready to punch, but found it held fast by the tentacle. The beast dropped the club and gripped the knight's sword arm instead. Its strength was too great. Sir Gilles felt the blood fleeing his fingers. He dropped his weapon.

A cracking noise. The beastman let its lower jaw dislocate like a snake's, the bone hanging loose in stretching skin. The teeth, coated in spittle, glistened in the flames.

Sir Gilles tried to struggle but the beast held him fast. He prayed to the Lady.

Not this way. Not like this.

With a roar the horse-head sank its teeth into his neck and bit down hard. Then stopped.

The tentacle uncoiled itself, and the fingers around his sword arm went slack. The beastman pitched forward, a dead weight.

Scrabbling back out from under the monstrosity, one hand to his neck to stem the flow of blood, Sir Gilles saw that an arrow protruded from the back of the creature's neck, lost in the mane.

Not having time to question his good fortune, and losing blood fast, Sir Gilles drew on the last reserves of strength and pounded across to the witch.

Lowering Gregory to the ground, the fiend did not see him.

Gilles knocked him to the side, rolled over with him, pinned him to the ground. One punch destroyed his nose.

Choking on blood that flowed down his throat, the witch stared up at the Grail Knight. His eyes were wild with shock and, though Sir Gilles dare not think it, what looked like fear.

Starting to lose consciousness, Sir Gilles brought his fist down once again. The witch went limp.

More arrows flew out of the darkness, bringing beastmen down as they closed in on Sir Gilles. The others stopped to sniff the air.

Clambering off the witch, Sir Gilles went to Gregory. Felt for a pulse. The boy still lived.

The beastmen started baying in alarm. A crashing of undergrowth. Horses' hooves. The clank of armour. The glint of weapons in the flames. The baron had arrived.

The slaughter was great. Not a beastman was permitted to live. Though the fire burnt still in the centre of the clearing, the baron ordered that their bodies should be left to rot, their heads put upon spikes as a warning to others of their kind. To prevent desecration, the bodies of the ten sacrificed soldiers were taken back to the Chambourt, together with the witch. For him, the flames awaited.



IT WAS A stark, cold morning. The entire town was assembled outside the castle grounds. For a week now, the pyre that would claim the life of the witch had been under construction. Every household had contributed wood. Many trees had been felled. It towered above the crowd, in competition with the castle itself, a man-made cousin to the peaks beyond. A scaffold had been built around it, enabling the chaos-worshipping fiend to be marched up to the stake at the summit.

Having been put to the torture for the entire time his execution was being prepared, he was at last a broken figure. Pale and hunched, head scabbed over where his hair had been burnt off in a bucket of hot coals, he stumbled upwards, each step an agony. From a platform at the base of the pyre, the baron noted with grim satisfaction that the witch's eyes, where defiance had burned so long, now seemed confused and bovine.



'HELP ME TO the window, Gregory,' Sir Gilles said in a faint voice. 'I wish to watch the monster's final moments.'

Pale, drawn and confined to his bed, the Grail Knight's health had deteriorated since his ordeal. His leg had not set well and the bite mark, through which he had lost a lot of blood, was not healing satisfactorily. That morning, Blampel, the old fool, had muttered something indistinct about a possible infection.

In contrast, Gregory, his cheeks ruddy with the flush of youth, was as sturdy as ever before.

He lifted the old retainer from his bed and supported him while he hobbled on his broken leg to the window. Sir Gilles rested himself against the sill, his breathing shallow, his thoughts scattered and vague. If this was a taste of old age, he said to himself, then he prayed that his end would not be long in coming.

Tapestries lifted in the wind as Gregory opened the windows. A low rumble of conversation drifted upwards from the crowd. The occasional cry of a hawker advertising his wares.

The window was level with the top of the pyre, towards which the crippled figure was being marched. The gaoler tied the witch to the stake and made his way back down the steps.

Sir Gilles stared, unblinking, at his hated enemy.

The monster strained forward from the stake, feebly struggling, the filth on his face streaked with tears. A distressed shrieking came from his empty mouth. He seemed more like a child than a man.



THE GAOLER HANDED the baron a flaming brand. All chatter in the crowd died. The witch was screaming down at the baron, neck fully outstretched, eyes bulging, demented. Though his words could not be understood, it was clear he was pleading for mercy. At last, thought the baron. At last.

Making sure he maintained eye contact with his enemy, the baron slowly put the torch at the base of the pyre.

With a crackle of dry tinder, the hungry flames leapt up.

At the sight of the orange glow far beneath him, the witch hysterically started to repeat the same word over and over.



THE SAME WORD over and over. Sir Gilles felt the hairs on the back of his neck and arms bristle. A prickling sensation came to his face.

The word. The word sounded like—

He turned to look at Gregory. He stood, arms folded, impassively surveying the grim scene. His mouth was curled into a sneering smile.

Sir Gilles started to shake.

The wind brought the scent of burning flesh into the room.

Arms still folded, Gregory waved a dismissive hand at the knight.

‘Die,’ he said.



THE FLAMES LICKED up. The baron forced himself to keep his eyes on the witch. The fire seared his flesh now, billowing through his clothes. Still he screamed out the same word, rasping and harsh.



SIR GILLES STAGGERED back from the window. He dropped to his knees. Felt the air fleeing his lungs. A sharp pain in his head. Tears in his eyes. Blood in his mouth.

Deadly malice flashing in his eyes, Gregory paced around him in a circle.

‘Old fool. You did not think to question the nature, the purpose of the ceremony.’

The Grail Knight started to shake.

‘The ceremony, the deaths of those ten men, wasn’t merely to satisfy my blood-lust. It had a purpose.’

‘No...’ Sir Gilles croaked. ‘No...’

‘That night, by the unholy power of my dark master I took the body of the baron’s son.’ The man that called himself Gregory came close to Sir Gilles’s ear. ‘And bequeathed him mine.’

Outside, the screaming had stopped. Framed by the small window, Sir Gilles could see all that remained of the witch’s body, a column of black smoke.

The darkness of death crowding in on his mind, Sir Gilles locked his hands together in desperate prayer.

He knew now what the word had been.



IT WAS OVER. The people were still silent, awe-struck by the terrible sight they had witnessed. The flames roared on, hungrily consuming the last of the wood.

Suddenly exhausted, the baron let his head drop. The acrid smoke stung his eyes. He moved towards the edge of the platform, his guards stepping aside to allow him onto the steps.

The crowd cheered him as he walked, but he barely heard it. An inexplicable sorrow hung heavily on his heart. He cared nothing for his land, nor his faithful subjects. Only one thing mattered to him now. His son, his heir: Gregory.



WATCHING THE DEAD knight, his aged face contorted with the anguish of his final moments, the witch’s eyes flashed with triumph.

The sound of the baron’s approaching footsteps on the cold stone echoed along the corridor.

Transforming Gregory’s features into a suitable mask of sorrow, the witch opened the door and fell into his father’s arms.

Seeing the knight’s fallen form beyond the doorway, the baron gave a cry of grief and pulled his son tightly to him.

Face pressed into the baron’s tunic, Gregory’s muffled voice repeated the same word over and over. Though the sadness was almost too much to bear, the baron took comfort at the word. It was all he had left.

He pulled his son closer, rocking him gently, one hand cradling the back of his head.

The same word, over and over.

‘Father.’ ❀



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Portrait Of My Undying Lady

by Gordon Rennie

'A COMMISSION, YOU SAY? What kind of commission?' Giovanni Gottio leaned across the table, wine slopping from the cheap copper goblet in his hand. It would soon be replenished, he knew, in just the same way as his new-found friend sitting opposite had been steadily refilling Giovanni's goblet all night.

'A portrait,' answered his new-found friend. 'In oils. My employer will pay you well for your time.'

Giovanni snorted, spilling more wine. Absent-mindedly he dabbed one grimy finger in the spilled mess, painting imaginary brush strokes on the rough surface of the bar table. Faces. Faces had always been his speciality. Strangely, though, he had been sitting with the man for hours, drinking his wine and spending his money, but if the stranger got up and left this minute, Giovanni would have been unable to say what exactly he looked like. His was more a blurred impressionistic sketch of a face – eyes cold and cruel, mouth weak and arrogant – than any kind of finished work. The most memorable thing about him in Giovanni's mind was the way the emerald ring on his finger caught and held even the dim candlelight of this grimy back street taverna.

'Haven't you heard?' Giovanni slurred, becoming gradually aware that he was far more drunk than he should be this early in the night, even after those three pitchers of wine the stranger had bought for him. 'The great Gottio doesn't do portraits any more. He is an artist, and artists are supposed to show truth in their work. The trouble is, people don't want the truth. They don't like it. That fool Lorenzo Lupo certainly didn't, when he commissioned the great Gottio to paint a portrait of his wife.'

Giovanni realised he was shouting now, that he was drawing sniggering glances from the other regular patrons of the taverna. Not caring, he reached out to angrily refill his goblet once more.

'Did you see it, my portrait of that famed beauty, the wife of the Merchant Prince of Luccini? Not many people did, for her husband had it destroyed as quickly as he could. Still, those few that did see it said that it captured the woman perfectly, not just in its

reflection of her exquisite beauty but even more so in the way it brought out all the charm, grace and personality of the hungry mountain wolf that lurked beneath that fair skin.'

Giovanni drained his goblet and slammed it down, stumbling as he got up to leave. *This drunk after only three pitchers, he thought. The great Gottio truly has lost his touch...*

'So, thank you for your hospitality, sir, but the great Gottio no longer paints portraits any more. He paints only the truth, a quality which would sadly seem to be in little fashion amongst this world's lords and masters.'

Mocking laughter followed him out of the taverna. Outside, he staggered along the alleyway, leaning against a wall for support. *Shallya's mercy. That cheap Pavonian wine certainly had a kick to it!*

A welcome night breeze sprang up, carrying with it the strong scent of the fruit orchards that grew on the slopes of the Trantine Hills overlooking the city, and Giovanni took several deep breaths, trying to clear his head. From behind, he heard quick, decisive footsteps following him out of the taverna; clearly his new-found friend wasn't a man prepared to take 'no' for an answer.

Giovanni turned to greet his persistent new friend for the night, but instead of the ingratiating smile he expected, he saw a snarl of anger. A hand reached out, grasping him by the throat and lifting him off his feet. Claws sprang out where there had only been fingernails before, and Giovanni felt their sharp edges dig into the skin of his exposed throat. The hand held him there for long seconds as he struggled, unable to draw breath, never mind cry for help. And then it suddenly released him. Senses dimming, Giovanni fell to the ground, only half-conscious as his supposed friend effortlessly dragged him through the shadows towards a nearby waiting coach. There was the sound of a coach door opening, and a face as bright and terrible in its unearthly beauty as that of the Chaos moon of Morrslieb looked down at him as Giovanni finally slipped into uncon-sciousness.

'No matter, Mariato,' he heard it speak in a voice as cold as glacial ice. 'This way will do just as well...'

GIOVANNI AWAKENED, immediately recognising in the pain throbbing behind his eyes the all-too-familiar signs of the previous night's excesses. Mind still numbed by the copious quantities of wine he had no doubt cheerfully downed, it took him several seconds to register the fact that this was not the hovel-like garret that the recent downturn in his fortunes had reduced him to calling home. Nor were his clothes – a shirt of finest Cathay silk and breeches of pure Estalian calfskin – the same threadbare and patchy garments that he had put on the previous morning.

Previous morning? he thought suddenly realising that it was still night, a silver sliver of the waxing Morrslieb moon visible through the barred window above his bed. He ran a hand to his face, feeling the rough stubble of what felt like two days' beard growth that had not been there earlier. Shallya's mercy. How long had he been unconscious?

There was a rattle of keys at the only door into the room. Giovanni tensed, ready to... what, he wondered. Fight? Overpower his gaolers and try to escape? Half a head smaller than his average countryman – the stature, or more precisely lack of it, of the inhabitants of the Tilean peninsula was the basis of many jokes amongst the other nations of the Old World – and with something of a paunch that the long months of penury since his fall from grace had still so far mostly failed to diminish. Giovanni knew that he was hardly the stuff that dashing dogs of war mercenary hero legends were made of. The only wound he had ever suffered was a broken nose inflicted during a heated taverna dispute with some fop of a Bretonnian poet over the favours of young and curvaceous follower of the arts. The only blade he had ever wielded was a small knife used to sharpen the charcoal pencil nubs he sketched with.

The heavy door swung open, revealing two black-robed figures standing in the corridor outside. Faceless under their hooded robes, it was impossible to determine anything about them. A hand, pale and skeletal thin, appeared from within the folds of one of the robes, gesturing for the artist to rise and come with them. Shrugging with an attempted air of casual nonchalance that he wished he truly felt, Giovanni did as commanded.

He found himself in a wide, stone-walled corridor, falling into step between his faceless gaolers. Stars shone through breaks in the wood-raftered ceiling, and, glancing up,

Giovanni saw the shattered ruins of a burned-out upper storey above him. The floor at his feet had been hurriedly swept clean, with piles of rubble and ancient fire debris piled up at its sides, and Giovanni could just make out blackened and faded frescoes under the grime and soot on the corridor walls. They showed nymphs and satyrs at play and were of a pastoral style that went out of fashion over a century ago. The night breeze drifted in through the breaks in the ruined ceiling, and Giovanni caught the faint but familiar scent of distant fruit groves.

With a shock of recognition, he realised that he was probably in one of the abandoned villas that dotted the countryside hills above Trantio. There were many such ruins, Giovanni knew, for in safer and more prosperous times it had been the fashion amongst the city's wealthy merchant families to build such palaces in the surrounding countryside, as both an ostentatious display of wealth and a retreat from the squalor of the city. A downturn in mercantile fortunes and the steadily increasing numbers of greenskin savages stealing over the Apuccini Mountains had brought an abrupt end to the such rural idylls, and the survivors abandoned their countryside retreats and fled back to the comfort of their counting houses and the safety of high and well-guarded city walls. Since then, the abandoned villas had become notorious as lairs for the predators that hid out in the wilderness areas beyond the limits of the Trantine city guard's horseback patrols.

Predators such as bandit gangs or orc warbands, or–

Or what? Giovanni wondered with a shudder, his lively artist's imagination painting a series of vivid nightmare images of all the things bad enough to scare bandits and even orcs away from such a place.

Something rustled at Giovanni's feet and he jumped back as a large rat scampered out of a hole in the floor and ran across the corridor, running right over the top of his booted feet. There was a blur of movement from behind him, followed instantly by a harsh squeal of pain and an abrupt wet tearing sound. Giovanni turned, catching a glimpse of the scene beneath the hooded cloaks behind him – long skeletal fingers crammed something squealing and still alive between jaws distended horribly wide open – before a warning hiss from his other gaoler urged him to keep moving. Suitably inspired, Giovanni's

imagination mentally erased the previous portfolio of nightmare images and began work on a new gallery of even greater horrors.

The corridor ended in an open doorway, soft light spilling out from the open doorway there. Urged on by a low angry grunt from one of the gaoler creatures, Giovanni gingerly stepped forward into the room beyond.

The chamber was how he imagined the villa would have looked in its heyday. It was opulently furnished, and his gaze passed over a tempting-looking platter of fruit and a crystal decanter of wine laid out on a nearby table – did his captors seek to trick him into poisoning himself after having him at their mercy for at least a day as he lay insensible in his cell, he wondered? – and also the oddly disquieting sight of a painting easel with a blank canvas upon it. But it was the paintings on the walls all around that drew his immediate attention.

There were a full dozen of them, and they were by far the greatest collection of art that Giovanni had ever seen.

There he recognised the brushwork of the legendary da Venzio, whose monumental frescoes decorating the ceiling of the great Temple of Shallya in Remas were still one of the great wonders of the Old World. And beside it was a canvas bearing the distinctive Chaos-tainted style of the mad Estalian genius Dari, whose work had been condemned as heretical two hundred years ago and was still banned throughout the Empire to this day. Hanging on the wall opposite the Dari was a work bearing all the hallmarks of the work of Fra' Litti. There were only eight known Litti paintings still in existence, all of them in the possession of the richest merchant princes of Tilea who competed with each other in bitterly-fought bidding wars to purchase only the rarest and most exquisite works of art. If this really was a ninth and until-now unknown Litti, then its potential value was truly incalculable.

Giovanni's senses continued to reel at the wealth of artistic riches that surrounded him. Over here a work by Bardovo, whose epic depiction of Marco Columbo's discovery of Lustria spawned a whole school of lesser talented imitators. Beside it hung a canvas bearing the disturbing scratch-mark signature of the mysterious Il Ratzio, who some historians now whispered may not even have been fully human.

It was only then, as he reached out to touch the da Venzio canvas, his fingers reverently tracing the maestro's brushstroke patterns, that an even greater and more profound realisation about all the paintings collected here occurred to him.

They were all portraits, and they were all of the same subject: an alabaster-skinned noblewoman of striking but glacial beauty.

Giovanni gazed from portrait to portrait, his eyes confirming what his mind would not yet accept. No matter the artist, no matter the difference in their individual styles, each had painted the same subject, and from life too, if the telltale details in each painting were to be believed. Here he saw the same glint of forbidden promise in the dark pools of her eyes, there the same hint of unspoken secrets behind the faint mocking smile on her lips. But while each artist had found the same qualities in their subject, each also found in her something different. In da Venzio's portrait she was a beguiling angel of darkness, his painting a blasphemous twin piece to the images of the blessed goddess of mercy on the temple ceiling in Remas. Bardovo's work showed her as a lonely spectral figure standing against a backdrop of a corpse-strewn battlefield.

How could this be? Giovanni wondered. *Da Venzio had lived three hundred years ago, Bardovo more than a thousand and Fra' Litti and one or two others even longer than that...*

A faint breeze passed through the air of the room, sending flickering shadows over the faces of the portraits as it disturbed the flames of the many candles which lit the chamber.

'How could artists that lived centuries apart all come to have painted the same subject?' said a voice from somewhere close behind Giovanni, completing the thought that his mind dared not yet ask itself.

He turned to face the figure reclining on the couch behind him, a figure who had not been there moments ago, he was sure. She was even more beautiful in person, he thought. More beautiful and more terrible than any portrait – even one by the great da Venzio himself – could ever do full justice to. Her eyes were endless pools of mystery that drank in everything, surrendering nothing in return. Her blood-red lips were full and of the same colour as the burning scarlet rubies which hung at her plunging neckline, revealing flawless skin that glowed like soft moonlight, skin that had not felt the kiss of sunlight in centuries.

'I am the Lady Khemalla of Lahmia,' she said in a voice that whispered like the shifting desert sands of her long-dead homeland. 'I bid you welcome to my home.'

'Then I am not a prisoner here?' asked Giovanni, surprised at his directness of his own question.

'You are my guest,' she smiled. 'And, while you are my guest, it pleases me for you to paint my portrait.' She gestured at the paintings around them. 'As you can see, I have a taste for art. And occasionally for artists too.'

She smiled at this last comment, blood-red lips curling back to show the subtle points of concealed fangs.

'Why me?' asked Giovanni, pouring himself a generous measure of wine from the decanter. Doomed as he was, he saw no need to deny himself a few final pleasures.

'If you know what I am, then you must understand that it has been many years since I have gazed upon my own face in the glass of any mirror. To never again see the features of your reflection, to live so long that you perhaps forget the image of your own face, can you begin to imagine what that might be like, mortal? Is it any wonder that so many of my kind give themselves fully over to madness and cruelty when they have nothing left to remind them of their own humanity? I can only see myself through the eyes of others, and so I choose to do so only through the eyes of the greatest artists of each age.'

She paused, favouring him with a look from the deep desert oases of her eyes as she again gestured at the paintings hanging on the walls around them. 'You should be honoured, little mortal. After all, consider the company I am including you in here.'

'You know that I have a reputation for only painting the truth as I see it.' Nervous, he reached to refill his already empty glass, concentrating hard to quell the involuntary tremor in his hands. 'It is a trait of mine that found little favour with my previous patrons. I have discovered to my cost that people wish only to have their own flattering self-image of themselves reflected back at them.'

She smiled at his show of bravado. 'I chose you because of your reputation. You say you only paint the truth, the true soul of your subject. Very well, then that is what I want, brave little mortal. The truth. Look at me and paint what you see. To try and capture on canvas the soul of one of my kind; what greater challenge could there be for an artist?'

'And afterwards, when the work is complete? You will let me leave?'

'You will be free to refuse my hospitality when you have gifted me something that I deem worthy of your talents. If your work pleases me you will be well rewarded for your troubles, I promise you.'

'And if it does not, what then?'

The question hung unanswered in the air between them.

Giovanni set down his goblet and went over to the easel and blank canvas set up nearby. As he had expected, there was a palette there of every imaginable kind of artists materials. He rummaged amongst them, selecting a charcoal pencil for sketching and a knife to sharpen it with. A challenge, she had called it, and so it was. To paint the soul of a creature of the darkness, an age-old liche-thing, and yet to paint only the truth of what lay beneath that perfect ageless skin while still producing something that would please this most demanding of patrons. This would either be the greatest work of his life, he thought, or merely his last.

He turned back to his waiting subject, his practised eye seeing her at this earliest stage as merely a vexing collection of surfaces, angles, lines and subtle blends of light and shadow. The fine detail, in which lay those crucial insubstantial elements that would determine whether he lived or died here, would come later.

'Shall we begin?' he said.



LIKE THE VILLA'S other inhabitants, he worked only at night now and slept by day. Each night after sundown they came for him, and each night she sat for him. She talked while he worked – he always encouraged his subjects to talk, the better to understand them and their lives, for a portrait should speak of far more than its subject's mere outward physical appearance – and as he worked he heard tales of her homeland. Tales of gods, heroes and villains whose names and deeds are remembered now by none other than those of her kind; tales of mighty cities and impregnable fortresses now reduced to a few ancient crumbling ruins buried and forgotten beneath the desert sands.

Some nights they did not come for him. On those nights, she sent apologies for her absence, and gifts of fine wines and food, and books to let him pass the time in his cell more easily. The books, usually works of history or philosophy, fascinated him. Several of them were written in languages completely unknown to Giovanni – the languages of legendary and far-distant Cathay or Nippon, he thought – while one was composed of thin leafs of hammer-beaten copper and inlaid with a queer hieroglyphic script which he doubted was even human in origin.

He knew that there were other occupants of the villa, although besides his silent faceless gaolers and his patron herself he had seen none of them. But as he lay in his cell reading on those work-free nights, he heard much activity going on around him. Each night brought visitors to the place. He heard the clatter of rider's hooves and the rumble of coach wheels and the jangle of pack team harnesses, and once he thought he heard the beating of heavy leather wings and perhaps even saw the fleeting shadow of something vast and bat-like momentarily blotting out the moonlit window above his bed.

There were other sounds too – screams and sobs and once the unmistakable cry of an infant child – from the cellars deep beneath his feet. At such times Giovanni buried his face into the mattress of his bedding or read aloud from the book in his hand until either the sounds had ceased or he had convinced himself that he could no longer hear them.



ONE NIGHT HE awoke in his room. The sitting had been cut short that night. One of the black-cloaked servant things had entered and fearfully handed its mistress a sealed scroll tube. As she read it her face had changed – *transformed*, Giovanni thought – and for a second he saw something of the savage and cruel creature of darkness that lay beneath the human mask she presented to him. The news was both urgent and unwelcome and she had abruptly ended the night's session, issuing curt orders for him to be escorted back to his room. He had fallen asleep as soon as he lay down on the bedding, exhausted by the continued effort of keeping up with the night-time schedule of his new employer.

Again, he heard the sound that had awoken him. There was someone in the room with him.

A face detached itself from the shadowy gloom of the cell, leaning over the bed and glared angrily down angrily at him. Jagged teeth, too many of them for any human mouth, crowded out from snarling lips. It was her servant, Mariato, the one that had approached him in the tavern that night. He had obviously just fed, and his breath was thick with the slaughterhouse reek of blood.

'Scheherazade. That is what I shall call you,' the vampire growled, glaring down at him with eyes full of hate and the madness of bloodlust. 'Do you know the name, little painter? It is a name from her homeland, a storyteller who prolonged her life for a thousand and one nights by entertaining her master with tales and fables.'

The vampire raised one bristle-covered hand, pointing at the half-face of Mannslieb in the sky above. The ring on his finger flashed green in the moonlight.

'How many nights do you think you have left, my Scheherazade? Her enemies are close, and by the time Mannslieb's face shines full again, we will be gone from here. Will your precious painting be finished by then? I think not, for such things take great time and care, do they not?'

He paused, leaning in closer, hissing into Giovanni's face, stifling him with the sour reek of his carrion breath.

'She will not take you with us, and she cannot leave you here alive for our enemies to find. So what is she to do with you then, my Scheherazade?'

The vampire melted back into the shadows, its voice a whispering promise from out of the darkness.

'When Mannslieb's face shines full again, then you will be mine.'



YOUR SERVANT MARIATO, he doesn't like me.' She looked up with interest. This was the first time he had dared speak to her without permission. She lay reclining on the couch in the position that he had first seen her in. A bowl of strange dark-skinned fruit lay on the floor before her. The main composition of the piece was complete, and

all he needed to concentrate on now was the detail of the face.

'He is jealous,' she answered. 'He is afraid that I will grow bored with him and seek to make another my favourite in his stead.' She looked at him sharply. 'Has he disturbed you? Has he said or done anything to interrupt your work?'

Giovanni kept his eyes on his work, unwilling to meet her keen gaze. 'Has he a right to be jealous?'

She smiled, favouring him with a look of secret amusement. 'Perhaps,' she mused. 'His kind always have their place at my side, but they are always dull and unimaginative. Perhaps I will take a new consort, not a warrior or a nobleman this time. Perhaps this time an artist? What do you think, little mortal? Shall I make you my new paramour and grant you the gift of eternal life in darkness?'

She laughed, picking up a fruit from the bowl and biting deep into it, enjoying the taste of his fear. Thick juice, obscenely scarlet in colour, bled out of the fruit as she ate it.

Giovanni studied the lines and contours of the painted face on the canvas in front of him. A few brush-strokes, a subtle touch of shading, and he had added an extra element of sardonic cruelty to the line of her smile.



THE NEXT NIGHT he returned to his cell at dawn to find a small tied leather pouch sitting on his bed. He opened it, pouring out a quantity of powdered ash. Puzzled, Giovanni ran his fingers through the stuff, finding it strangely unpleasant to the touch. There was something amongst it. Giovanni gingerly picked it up, discovering it to be a ring. He held it up, the light of the rising sun catching the familiar emerald stone set upon it.

It seemed that Mariato no longer occupied the same position amongst his mistress's favours as he had once done.



GIOVANNI KNEW THAT their time together was coming to an end. Mannslieb hung high in the night sky, almost full, and for the last few nights there had been more activity than

usual in the villa. He heard the sound of heavy boxes – earth-filled coffins, he supposed – being dragged up from the cellars and loaded into wagons. He worked in daylight hours too now; foregoing sleep and working on the painting alone in his cell, making changes so subtle that he doubted anyone other than he would notice the difference. Adding new details and taking away others. Revising. Reworking. Perfecting. He was haggard and gaunt, exhausted from too little food and sleep, looking more like one of her pale ghoulish servants than the portly florid-faced drunk who had been brought here just scant weeks ago.

All that mattered now was the painting itself. The greatest work of his life, that is what he had said he would have to produce, and that is what he had done. After that, he discovered to his surprise, nothing else really mattered.



SHE SENT FOR him the next night, with Mannslieb shining full-faced in the night sky. The painting too, was now complete.

She stood looking at it. The room had been stripped almost bare, and the easel that the canvas stood on was the most significant item left in it. There were faint outlines on the walls where her portraits had hung.

'You are leaving?' he said, more in statement than question.

'We have many enemies, my kind. Not just the witch hunters with their silver and fire. We wage war amongst ourselves, fighting over sovereignty of the night. It has become too dangerous to remain here.'

She gestured towards the painting. 'It is beautiful, master Gottio. I thank you for your gift. What do you call it?'

'*Unchanging Beauty.*' he answered, joining her to look at his masterpiece. It showed her standing regally against a backdrop of palatial splendour. Giovanni's talent had captured all her cruel and terrible beauty as the others before him had also done, but the real artistry was in the detail of the trappings around her. Look closer and the eye was drawn to the tarnished gold of the throne behind her, the subtle patterns of mildew creeping across the wall tapestries, the broken pinnacles of the palace towers seen through the window in the far background. It was a world where

everything other than her was subject to change and decay. Only she was unchanging. Only she was forever.

'Then my task here is done. I am free to leave now?' He looked at her, half in hope, half in dread.

'I had thought to keep you here with me as an new diversion to replace poor Mariato.' She looked at him, trying to gauge his reaction, toying with him yet again.

'But, no, you would make a poor vampire, master Gottio,' she reassured him, relishing one last taste of his fear. 'There is something in our nature that destroys any creative ability we may have had in our mortal lives, and I would not deny the world the great works still within you. So, yes, you are free to go.'

'And my reward?'

She gestured towards a small open casket nearby. Giovanni glanced at it, silently toting up the value of the gold and precious stones it contained and coming to a figure comparable with a minor merchant prince's ransom. When he looked back, she was holding a goblet of wine out to him.

'What is it?' he asked, suspecting one final cruel jest.

'A little wine mixed with a sleeping draught, the same one that Mariato tried to lull you with. Call it a final precaution, for your own safety. When you awaken, you will be safe and in familiar surroundings, I promise you. I could compel you to drink it, but this way is easier.'

He took it, raising it to his lips and drinking. She watched him intently as he did so. The wine was excellent, as he expected, but mixed in with it, the taste of something else, not any kind of potion or sleeping draught. Something dark and rich, something that rose up to overwhelm his senses.

'An extra gift,' she said, seeing the reaction in his eyes. 'With your painting, you have given me a part of yourself. It only seemed fair that I give you something equally valuable in return. Farewell, little mortal, I look forward to seeing what uses you will put my gift to.'

She reached out with preternatural reflexes to catch him as he fell, as the darkness rushed in to envelop his numbed senses...

HE AWOKE IN blinding daylight, crying out in pain as the unaccustomed sunlight stabbed into his eyes. When he recovered, he realised that he was in the pauper's attic garret he called home. The precious casket lay on the floor beside him.

It took him several hours to realise the nature of the additional gift she had given him.

He sat inspecting his reflection in the small cracked looking glass he had finally managed to find amongst the jumble of his possessions. Days ago he had been a haggard wreck, now there was not a trace of the ordeal left upon him, none of the exhaustion of the last few weeks. He looked and felt better than he had in years. In fact...

Shallya's mercy, he thought, studying the reflection of his face in the mirror. *I look ten years younger!* He thought of certain legends about her kind, about the gifts they granted to their loyal mortal servants and about the restorative powers of...

Of vampire blood. Only the smallest portion, but he could feel it flowing in his veins, feel her inside him. Her life-force added to his own. Had she done this with the others, he wondered, and then he remembered that the da Venzio had been reputed to have lived to over a century in age – blessed by the mercy goddess, they said, in reward for the work he had done in her great temple in Remas – and of how Bardovo had lived long enough to paint not just the portrait of the Marco Columbo but also that of the legendary explorer's merchant prince great-grandson.

He wondered how long he, Giovanni Gottio, had, and about how he would put his time to best use.

He looked around his squalid attic, seeing only the detritus of his former miserable life: smashed wine bottles and pieces of cheap parchment torn up in anger and thrown in crumpled balls across the room. He picked one up, smoothing it out and recognising it as the abandoned portrait sketch of a local tavern girl. The workmanship was poor and he could see why he had so quickly abandoned the piece, but looking at it with fresh vision he could see possibilities in its line and form that had not been there to him before.

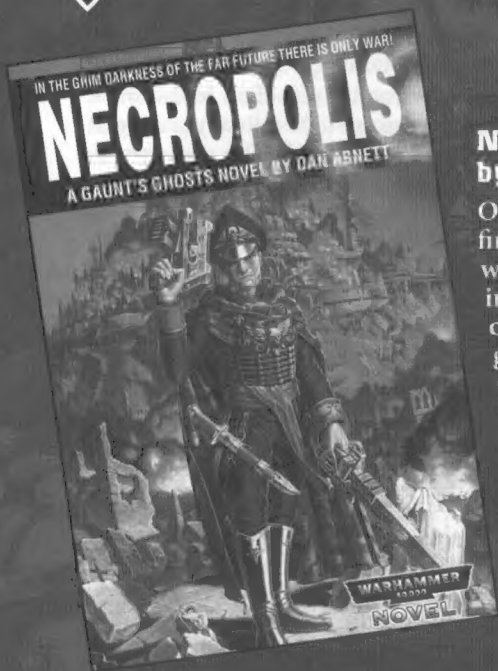
He found his drawing board and pinned the parchment to it, sitting looking at it in quiet contemplation. After a while, he searched amongst the debris on the floor and found the broken end of a charcoal pencil.

And with it, he began to draw. ●





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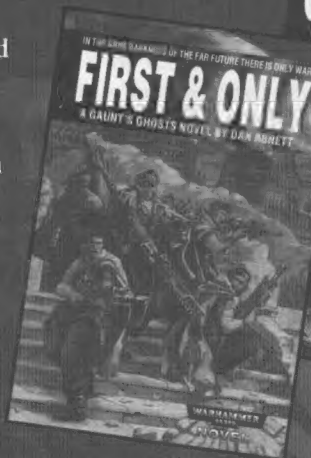
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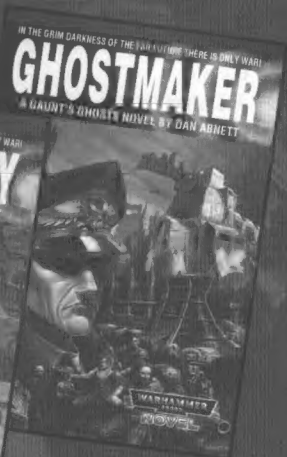
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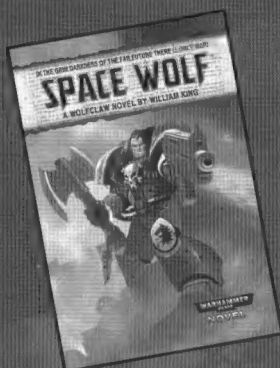


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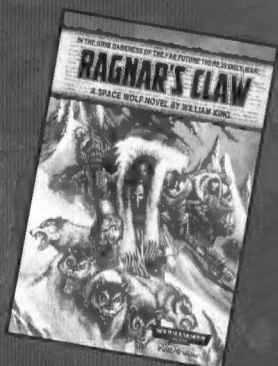
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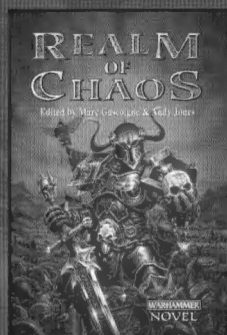


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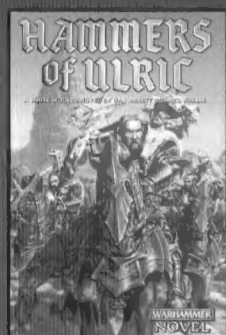
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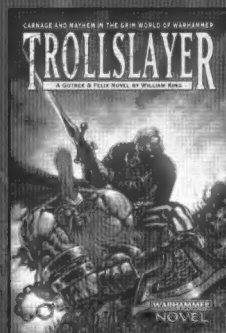
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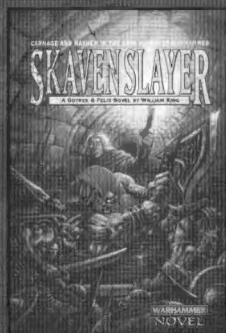
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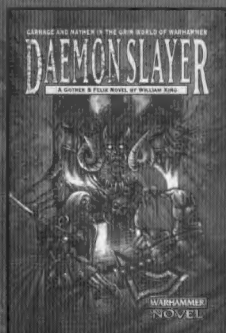
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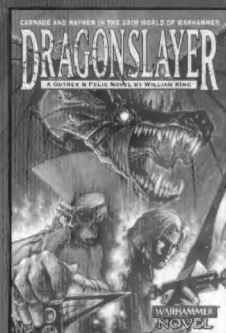
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He glimpsed a quadruped, long and lean, twice the size of a man, it seemed. It was as blood-red as the rain. Memnes saw a suggestion of teeth, huge as scythe blades, of claws, of a whipping tail, as long and knobbed and gristly as a length of human spine.

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All combatants disappeared from Tomas' view and all he could see now was Gabriel's face wearing a feral snarl. One sergeant reappeared immediately, one hand grasping the other to stem the wellspring of blood which gushed there. Tomas didn't see his father die but he heard it.

• **MAMA'S BOYS by Jonathan Green**

And in the gloom at the back of the jailhouse, in a sleeveless undershirt and tanned britches, his stubble almost as long as the close-cropped greying hair on his head, crouched the bounty hunter. Standing stock-still in the open and unarmed, with unblinking eyes Tuntan Kaynn looked into the barrels of two primed stub guns.

• **SON AND HEIR by Ian Winterton**

The beastman let its lower jaw dislocate like a snake's, the bone hanging loose in stretching skin. The teeth, coated in spittle, glistened in the flames.

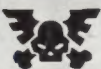
Sir Gilles tried to struggle but the beast held him fast. He prayed to the Lady.
Not this way. Not like this.

• **PORTRAIT OF MY UNDYING LADY by Gordon Rennie**

Giovanni turned, catching a glimpse of the scene beneath the hooded cloaks behind him – long skeletal fingers crammed something squealing and still alive between jaws distended horribly wide open – before a warning hiss from his other gaoler urged him to keep moving. Suitably inspired, Giovanni's imagination mentally erased the previous portfolio of nightmare images and began work on a new gallery of even greater horrors.

Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

WARNING
THIS PRODUCT CONTAINS



VIOLENCE!



CHAOS!



CARNAGE!

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